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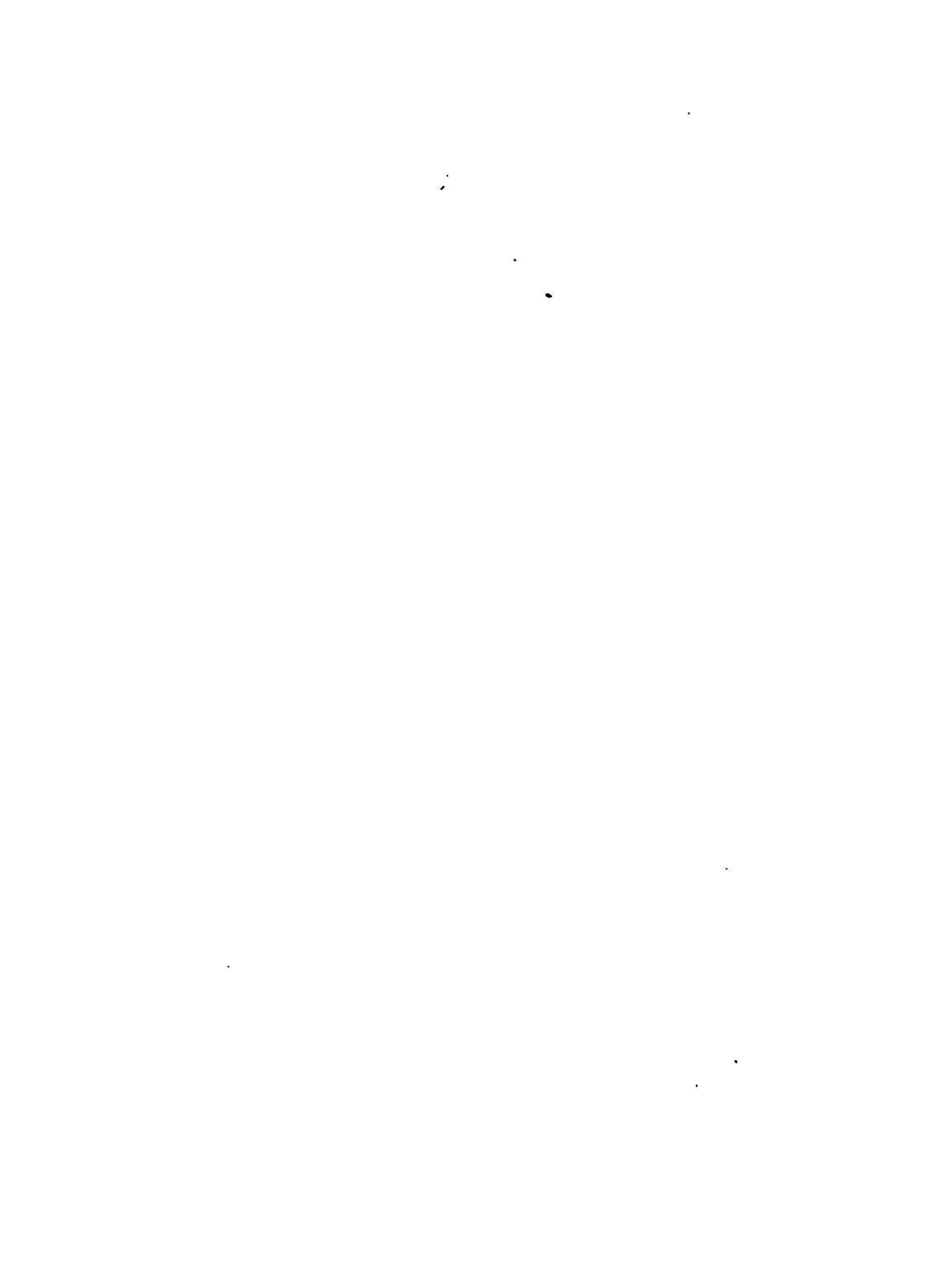
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172



THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

BY

NORMAN WAY

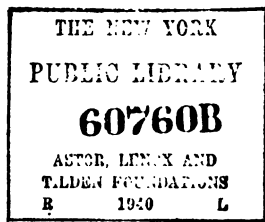
Author of

"Mary Jane's Pa," "My Friend the Burro," "Captains Three," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY A. W. PARSONS



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EDWARD J. CLODE

TO
THOMAS W. HANSHEW, ESQ.
WITH AN AFFECTION
THAT IS UNDIMMED BY YEARS OR ABSENCE

W O R 19 FEB '36

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE MAN WHO WAS	1
II. THE STORY OF RED GOLD	12
III. A NATIVE APPEARS	38
IV. THE MINER, THE GAMBLER, AND THE GIRL	47
V. MALICULA, THE DOG	60
VI. BARSTOW PLAYS BIG STAKES	78
VII. BARSTOW'S END	94
VIII. KENTUCKY WINS	110
IX. THE GOLDEN MOCCASINS	123
X. A GRIM TALE	138
XI. KENTUCKY HEARS A TALE	155
XII. SPARHAWK AND I DO BATTLE	173
XIII. WE TAKE TO THE TRAIL	194
XIV. THE HATCHET'S VENGEANCE	215
XV. SPARHAWK FINISHES	231
XVI. AN UNEXPECTED BLOW	247
XVII. ALONE I CONTINUE	261
XVIII. THE PLACE OF THE RED GOLD	275
XIX. THE LONG TRAIL	287

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

We opened the tent fly, and looked inside . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	PAGE
The visitor approached until he stood in front of me . . .	97
Kentuck knew the way and ran ahead of the dogs . . .	206
I worked the sapling underneath as a support . . .	255
I stared with bulging eyes at the gold beneath my feet . . .	273
“Mush! Mush on!” always my sole thought . . .	293

THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

CHAPTER I

THE MAN WHO WAS

“**A**ND the gold was red—red as blood—like as if the blood of them that had died for it on the long, long trail had stained it clean down into the frozen mud! And I had some of it in my hands—so! In these hands! And it ran between my fingers like little frozen drops of blood! And then I lost it, and I’ll never find it again! Never!”

I heard a thin, cracked voice above me, and, leaning on my shovel, looked up to where sat an old man with hands held out, lifting them up and down, clawlike, with the palms upward, and fingers opened as if still scooping up and letting fall through them the streams of gold, red and hard, like frozen blood.

I had not seen him before. I did not know when he had come. From under his mink cap, which was so old that the fur was worn away

2 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

showing the black, greasy skin beneath, his gray hair dropped to his shoulders, and covered his ears, and joined the straggling, white, unkempt beard that covered his face. His parka was too large for him, and had apparently been worn to the verge of uselessness. Now the sleeves were rolled up, to expose the skinny old arms, which were more like the scaly, attenuated legs of a bird than the members of a human body. His trousers were patched with anything that had come to hand until the original color was lost. His mukluks, the skin boots of the old Alaska, were patched, also, and frayed until they no longer protected his feet.

He did not notice me, but reached his withered hands downward, made an imaginary scoop between his feet, held them up again, and repeated:

“Gold! Red gold! Red as blood!”

He did not look at me until my curt “Hello!” aroused him, then his hands held themselves poised, and he shifted his bleached blue eyes toward me, and appeared to be trying to recall me to his recollection.

“I don’t know you,” he said soberly.

“I don’t suppose you do,” I answered. “I just came in. I’m from Cassiar.”

Some remnant of sanity seemed to control



the faded eyes, and the withered hands dropped again to their normal position of rest.

"Cassiar? I used to work there. So you're no chechahco, eh? And I've been to Killisnu. Know Killisnu and old Bill Joyce, him they called Killisnuish? And Bevins, and Sinclair, and Chapman, and——" his voice trailed off into a list of inarticulate names as his mind reverted to the past.

"That's old Bill Wilton. Touched he is, poor old cuss!" said a soft, growling voice behind me, and I turned to the man working with me, through whom I had come from Circle City, far up on the lazy stretches of the Yukon River.

He put a finger on his lips, and added: "Don't pay any attention to him. Get Cavanaugh, the post trader, to tell you about it when old Bill isn't around. Bill's got ears like a burro, and he's—well, he's sensitive."

He resumed his shovel again, and I did likewise, knowing that the day was waning, and that we must try to get the last of the pay dump we had bought shoveled in before our scant supply of water, impounded in the dam above, had exhausted itself; but I thought of the little information my partner, Dan Hillyer, had vouchsafed me, and wondered at the strange old man who still sat above us on the

4 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

bank, and still reached his hands down now and then, scooped up the dried gravel, and let it run through his fingers with that monotonous singsong of gold—"Red gold! Red as blood!"

I looked up in time to see a girl come behind him, and lay a gentle hand on his shoulder. My work was forgotten in the instant. My partner called to her, and lifted his hat, and she smiled at him gravely, and with friendliness. Then she leaped down the bank with nimble grace, and met him as, still holding his hat, he advanced.

"Why, Bessie," he said, with his slow drawl, smiling at her, "you've grown to be a woman—all in a couple of years! And prettier'n ever. How are you, anyway?"

She laughed, and I noted that her lips were red, her teeth white and even, and that I was enchained by her eyes. They were like those one dreams of sometimes—eyes that are not quite plain in their message, but deep, and soft, and intelligent. Hers were tempered by some suggestion of lasting sadness, and I wondered if it had anything to do with the wreck of a man on the bank above, still sifting pebbles. I was to have this answered by Hillyer's introduction.

"Tom," he said, turning to me, "this is Bessie Wilton. That's her daddy up there on the

bank. Bess and me's been friends since the day she was born, and that's pretty close to twenty years ago, ain't it, Bess? "

She did not smile when she shook hands with me in acknowledging the introduction, but gave me a long, steady scrutiny, as if wondering who I was, and what my character. I felt the need to answer her unasked question, but was spared the trouble by Dan.

"Tom Amann's his full name," he said, "and we hooked up together down in the Cassiar. He's from the Mother Lode mines, and is all right. He's an old friend of Cavanaugh's. Came on down here after I'd come ahead to see whether she was any good in this camp. Cassiar was petered out."

"But you must have made something from it," she said, addressing her remarks impersonally to both Dan and me, "or you couldn't have bought Markham's pay dump."

I did not feel called upon to answer or explain that the purchase had been a gamble, pure and simple, and that Markham, hurrying out to the States with gold for another claim, had made a mistake when he sold us this part of his winter's work; for we were cleaning up ten times as much as we had paid for it. My partner laughed, with his long-drawn, soft rumble,

6 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

and his next words diverted her from the topic.

“How’s the old man making it? Is he getting any better?”

Her face became more grave as she turned and looked at her father, on the bank.

“I don’t know,” she answered hesitatingly. “There are days at a time when he seems better, and says nothing of—of what he suffered. Then there are other days when he rambles on continually. Once, last spring, when the river broke and the green came out on the trees back on the hills, I was disturbed in the night. It was a sort of stealthy noise. I got up and looked in his part of the cabin. He was making a pack, and his old, mildewed pack straps were spread out on the floor, with the ragged old canvas laid over them, and he was laying bacon and beans, and baking powder and flour, in parcels on top of it. ‘It’s spring,’ he said; ‘it’s spring, and I must be off. I’ll find it for you this time, girl.’ And it was all I could do to get him to postpone his trip. Sometimes I give up hope. Then again I have more courage, and think perhaps he will get well.”

She stopped speaking, and I saw that my partner’s face was grave with sympathy, which she appeared to appreciate.

“But what are you doing?” he asked di-

rectly, and with the frontiersman's camaraderie which prompted him to speak of her financial affairs as if they were public.

"Oh, I am working for Mr. Cavanaugh," she answered easily. "I'm in the trading post now; keep the books, when he will let me, read his books, which he always volunteers, and so—well—we get along. Only, sometimes, I get tired of it all."

There was a slight note of rebellion in her voice and words, and I knew, in a flash, that, creature of the wilderness and the edge of the world as she was, she still had vague longings to pass out into that life whose tales of glamour and unrest had reached her here, more than a thousand miles from the nearest place that could be called civilized.

She turned away from us, calling back an invitation to Dan to come and visit her cabin, and wishing me a mere good-by. She spoke to her father, who obediently rose to his feet, and followed her away toward the mouth of the creek, which poured its shallow waters into the Yukon.

We did not speak as we began shoveling in again, hurrying to make up for lost time, and the sun crept across until it was low in the west, lacing the broad river with threads of shifting

gold, and permitting the purples of the long Arctic twilight to fasten themselves and grow upon the hills.

It was a familiar, brooding poem to me, this twilight of the North, for I had striven for gold in British Columbia and Alaska for five years, with varying success. Sometimes it had promised largely, and I had dreamed of what greater ventures I should assume when the spring dumps were cleaned, and at other times, hungry, cold, and trail-wearied, I had cursed the white pallor which had beckoned me with pale, spectral fingers, into its heartless depths, to whisper madness into my ears. But now it was summer, and I loved it.

Cassiar and Circle City had not treated us ill. We had no fortune, but we had enough to move on, and to keep from owing the trader for supplies. We had enough to buy Markham's dump, and in response to a letter from my partner, I had come down the river on a real steamboat, which had churned around bars, perilously threaded the sloughs of the Yukon Flats, and dumped me, the night before, at Neucloviat, the new camp, that, so far, had promised more than it had yielded.

Dan had taken a cabin from another old sourdough we had known at Circle City, and

who was going "outside" to pass a winter in a warmer climate—"to thaw out his bones," he said.

"Well, she's dry again." My partner's voice aroused me, and I looked at him where he stood at the head of our little string of sluice boxes, and then climbed up and saw that the stream was running so low and slow that it refused to pass the mud over the riffles. "Guess we'd better knock off. Let's go up and shut down the sluices, so that fool dam will fill up again. No use in trying to clean up with what water's left running in from the overflow."

He threw his shovel on the bank, wiped his forehead with the back of his shirt sleeve, and we trudged up the creek beside our little ditch. At the top we noted that the creek was daily running lower, at an almost alarming rate, and discussed this as we retraced our steps and started along the pebbles of the river beach for the camp, which lay almost two miles up the Yukon.

"She looks like business, all right, don't she?" Dan asked, waving his hand toward it as we came closer, after a long, silent tramp, in which each had been occupied with his own thoughts.

10 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

I studied the long range of high banks facing the river, which at that point was a full half mile broad. Here and there they rose into high cliffs, cut away into sheer lines by the ferocity of spring ravages of flood and ice. Across from the camp they bordered long, gradually ascending slopes, timbered in a heavy green. The camp itself was on a bench full sixty feet above the low-water mark, and, back of that again, the mountains climbed abruptly upward, clad in somber firs, and lightened by patches of silver birch, among which the evening shadows seemed lingering in a soft, hazy good-night.

More than two hundred cabins were there, including the straggling row of dance halls, trading posts, "stores," saloons, and "outfitters" which fronted the river as if inviting it to stop and view the grandeur of pioneerdom.

From some of the cabins, which scattered without pretense of street back toward the hills behind, pale wreaths of blue smoke crawled lazily upward, and the ring of an ax as some miner, loafing for the summer, chopped barely wood enough for his evening meal, mingled with the soft cry of the water fowl speeding here and there in quest of night feeding grounds.

In the strange, vibrant stillness of a sum-

mer's night on the Arctic Circle, all sounds were magnified. The "squawling" of a baby from the native settlement on the far side of the river, the bawling song of a boatman coming across, the barking of the malemutes as they tore up and down the shingle beach in front of the native village, and the fierce crescendo of howls and growls when they engaged in a fight; the guttural cries of a squaw as she put an end to the altercation with a club, and drove the combatants, yelping, to the huts of their owners; a bellow of laughter from the front of one of the rival trading posts where some man told a story that met the approval of his auditors.

Somehow, in its wild freedom, it was inspiring, and I was glad to be alive, to be a part of it, and to forget that winter was coming again inexorably. But as I walked I thought of Elizabeth Wilton, and wondered why she was there; who she was; where she had gathered that cultivated speech; and what brought the sadness and longing to her eyes as she turned them on the man who reiterated the drone of gold that was red as blood!

CHAPTER II

THE STORY OF RED GOLD

THE lights of the kerosene lamps were dim and low when I strolled into Cavanaugh's that night. He was leaning across his rough wood desk, oilcloth covered, and totaling a column of figures. The lamp above him, and the shadows behind, accentuated the whiteness of his hair, until it was rendered a halo of silver. The smell of the trading post was around him, from the damp, pungent odor of seal oil hanging from bladders in the loft, the acrid scent of furs, native cured, the sweet fragrance of sugar, freshly opened, the lower aromas of rice, and the salt smokiness of hams and bacon suspended from the rafters above. The shadows of light, playing across the lurid labels of canned vegetables and meats, and the gaudy prints which the Indians loved, and the strings of beads hanging to the shelf junctures, rendered them all a mellow setting, as they stared, harmonized, from the gloom.


"Hello," he greeted me, lifting his head, and

then, " Oh, it's you, is it, Tom Amann? Glad you dropped in. How do you like our camp? Looks like Circle used to two or three years ago, doesn't it? "

He drew away from the desk, and came back to the counter, across which he threw his weight and leaned on his elbows, as if inviting conversation.

I studied his face as I answered with ordinary, courteous conversation. It was a strange face, full of strange complexities. It had the forehead of the student, and the thoughtful eyes of the student; yet its chin was aggressive, and the mouth clean-cut and decisive. It was that chin which must have brought him to Alaska full thirty years before, when to so venture was to make a greater essay than had been the reckless sailing of Columbus in quest of a new world.

I had heard tales of his past, that told of a fiery youth, of sudden brawls in Pacific Coast camps, and of a flight after a quarrel when his enemy had lain white and still at his feet. Men reiterated that he was an Irish gentleman by birth, and spoke respectfully of his attainments. He was said to have known the shadows of Magdalen College in that glorious seat of learning, Oxford. And yet here he was, white and



14 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

old, running a trading post that was as isolated as any in the world.

I was so absorbed in listening to his comments that I had almost forgotten my desire to know more of old Bill Wilton until he referred to it himself. It was after I suggested that I was keeping him from his bookkeeping. He laughed at that.

"Well, it really doesn't amount to much," he said, "and can wait. I have a bookkeeper in my clerk, Bessie Wilton; but I must give her a lesson in Greek to-morrow, and so thought I would make it a trifle easier for her."

I sustained a distinct emotion of surprise at his words, and wondered how far his educational efforts with the girl I had seen on the bank had led him. The idea of a girl so advanced in her studies as to be worrying over Greek verbs, in that most isolated spot of the wilderness, was incongruous. He must have read my thought, for again he laughed, with that low, musical, amused note.

"It has been rather a recreation of mine," he said, "ever since she was a mere slip of a girl. She's never had a chance, and she was so bright that I began it rather as an amusement, kept it up until I found that it was excel-

lent mental training for myself, and, upon my word, she is a wonder! ”

His voice betrayed considerable pride in his pupil. He swung his legs over the counter with such ease that his years were belied, and sat on the outer edge by my side.

“ It must be something in the primitiveness of her surroundings,” he went on, “ that makes her so intelligent. Nothing to distract her attention, you know. No fol-de-rols of civilization, no pink teas, pink parties, or pink young men to flirt with. Why, Tom, I believe that pupil of mine could pass with honor almost any university examination that might be put up to her. I know. I’ve a degree or two myself.”

It sounded almost like a boast, this pride in his pupil and his own education. The student was speaking again.

“ It seems rather a pity that a man of your attainment should be buried here,” I blurted out, and for an instant he frowned and fixed his eyes on me harshly, as if satisfying himself whether or not I was impertinent; then, evidently deciding that my words veiled nothing suggestive or inquisitive, his face relaxed, and he gave something approaching a sigh.

“ Perhaps,” he replied slowly. “ But Fate does for us all. Now, there’s that girl. If fate

had not thrust me into the out-of-the-way places, she might have grown up in the worst ignorance, and an intelligence would have been wasted. She might have reverted. The call of that eighth of Indian blood might have made itself heard, and lured her back to the barabaras."

"Indian blood! An eighth Indian blood!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, I didn't think. I supposed you had heard the family history, and about poor old Bill. 'Red Gold Wilton,' some of the boys call him. Let's see! When you were in Circle they were up the river with Prevost."

"What about Wilton?" I asked eagerly. "I saw him to-day, and I was curious about him—about what brought him to that condition."

For a moment Cavanaugh sat quietly, looking out through the door at the growing twilight, and I thought he was not going to gratify my curiosity; then he thrust his hand into the pocket of his mackinaw, pulled out a well-seasoned pipe, filled it with the black "sheep-dip" of the North, and lighted it.

"Bill Wilton," he said at last, "has gone through enough to have killed more than one man out of every ten. He was one of the hand-



somest men I ever saw when I first came into the North. That was thirty years ago. I had found a position with the old Hudson's Bay Company up on the Stewart, when he came there for supplies. I made up an outfit for him, and enjoyed watching him."

Cavanaugh's voice had dropped to a reminiscent vein, and I settled myself to a more comfortable position.

"He stood at least six feet and an inch in his moccasins, had eyes like hot steel, and the grace of a jaguar. By heavens! I saw that man stand flat-footed, and, without any preliminary effort, or raising his hands, jump clear over a counter higher than this, just to stretch his muscles apparently! His strength was prodigious. He could carry anything he could get on his back. He could outlast any native that ever lived on the trail, and go farther on snowshoes than anyone I ever knew. His endurance was incredible. He was a wonderful man, and it was a joy to hear him talk, because he enjoyed living. His voice wasn't like it is now. You've heard him?"

I nodded my head, recalling that cracked, quavering monologue of "Red gold."

"His voice was big and round, and like—like—ever hear the big bell in Moscow? No?

18 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

Well, it was like that, anyway. One of those voices that you could hear in your mind long after he had finished speaking. I've heard him come singing down the trail nearly a mile away, on a still evening like this, and you can bet we all used to listen."

Cavanaugh shook his head, and was silent for a moment, as if absorbed in his own memories. I was about to ask him a question, when of his own volition he resumed.

"I don't suppose you ever heard the story; but there is a legend, among the natives, dating back to I don't know how long ago, and certainly known to the old H. B. factors for more than a hundred years, that somewhere, far up in the North, there is a deposit of gold that is enormous. It is red, and the Indian sagas shudder when it is mentioned. They say it is accursed. I'm not superstitious; but there may be something in it. I don't know! There are lots of things in this existence, fourth dimension, perhaps, that men, puny and blunt of intelligence, may not comprehend. I'm less assertive and contradictory about those inexplicable manifestations than I used to be, thirty years ago, when I came in here, and believed that anything I couldn't explain, didn't exist!"

I was surprised at this evidence of mysticism,

superstition, or whatever it might be classed, coming from his lips; but I held silence, waiting for him to continue.

“ Probably Bill Wilton paid small attention to the legend, although he must have heard of it,” he continued, “ until after he married the daughter of old MacCulloch. Mac was the factor of the H. B. post, where I worked when I came in from—well, that doesn’t matter. Mac had married a half-breed Cree girl. Daughter of another H. B. factor, up country, she was, and she might have been handsome when he met her; she wasn’t when I got acquainted with her. Gone to fat, a screeching tongue, and he had to keep the post rum under lock and key. But she bore a girl that was more Scotch than Cree. I’d have married her myself, if I could have done so, but Bill Wilton, with everything about him to command a woman’s affection, got her. I couldn’t blame her. He was Wilton the magnificent, with his big laugh and his big voice, and his big strength.

“ You can see what kind of a man he was when I tell you that on the day she promised to marry him he first went to old Mac, and told him that he was going to marry his daughter, then came directly to me, and put out his hand, and said, ‘ Sorry for you, Cavanaugh, but it’s

luck, and you're our best friend. Shake!' That was his way. And I danced at their wedding when the little missionary from Shebalath came up and performed the ceremony, and old MacCulloch broached a keg of brandy that had been in the post for fifty years."

He knocked the ashes from his pipe, and, after rubbing it, with a ruminating attitude, on the tail of his mackinaw, slipped it back into his pocket, crossed one leg over the other, clasped the upraised knee with his hands, and again spoke.

"Bill had a couple of seasons of bad luck working the bars, which was about all the mining that was done in that part of the country at that time, and one day he came into the post, and sat and talked to me for a long time about his plans. He wanted to know if I had ever heard anything about the red gold. I laughed, and told him it was about as reliable a tale as any other that the natives told, and that probably it was about as true as the story of the first fire, and the first boat, and the intervention of the Great Spirit when the seven tribes went to war; but Wilton didn't laugh. I remember yet how he sat there, staring at the light through the crack of one of those big drum stoves, and smoking, and sometimes not wink-

ing his eyes for a long time, as if he were absorbed in some dream.

“ ‘The old woman,’ he said, referring to Mac’s wife, his mother-in-law, ‘has been telling me about it, and I got into a native kazhga, coming down the trail the other night, and heard more of it from an old buck that wanted to be friendly. I believe there is such a ledge, and, Cavanaugh, I’m going to try to find it!’

“ You may be sure I tried to talk him out of the notion; but you see the man had lived so long among the natives, had wandered over so many thousand miles of wilderness, was so unafraid, and so down on his luck, that he was ready to believe and to try anything. I don’t think old MacCulloch was superstitious when it came to gold; but he, too, tried to dissuade Wilton, who grew more stubborn each day as he made his plans. He left his wife at the post, loaded up his dog sled, and slipped away into the North one brisk December morning, following some idea of his own, gathered probably from what he had gleaned from the native gossip.

“ And the Indians? He offered all sorts of inducements to get one to go with him, because no man, no matter how brave he is, likes to pull out that way, alone. It gets on his nerves.

22 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

But there wasn't an Indian could be induced to go with him for money or promise.

"I shan't forget the morning he left. The sky was cold and dusky, as it always is at that time of the year, when he straightened his dogs out and bade his wife good-by in front of the post. There was one withered old squaw there who looked like a native Witch of Endor, who abandoned her stolidity, shook her skinny, dirty old claws in the air, and told him he was going into the land of the accursed; that the end of his trail would lead him to the devil, and that God Almighty had set His seal on those barrens where the gold was supposed to be waiting, tempting and red.

"Wilton's wife cried a little, and weakened at the last, and clung to him, with her arms around his neck, out there under the cold morning dusk, and begged him to give it up; but he pulled her arms loose, tenderly but determined, and laughed, with that big, reckless, bell-like laugh of his, ran out to the handles of his sled, yelled 'Marchons!' to his leader, and tore away down the river's face, with the frosted snow skirling up behind him in a little cloud. He was a brave figure of a man as he turned, just before taking the bend, waved a good-by to us, and blew a kiss off his mittened fingers to his

wife, who was clinging to her father's arm, with tears running like drops of ice down her cheeks.

"It was late in the spring when he came back. He staggered into the post one day, so lean, and thin, and bony, that one could scarcely recognize him, and fell across the steps of the storeroom where we were working. I ran over and picked him up where he had fallen inside.

" 'Grub!' he croaked. 'I'm starving!'

"I got it for him, and ran across to tell his wife and old Mac that he was home again. It took him at least ten days to recover, he was so far gone. He had traveled so far that he had lost count of distances, and when his supplies ran out, ate his dogs, one at a time—ate his mukluks, boiled his fur parka, tried to eat the leather of his pack straps! And there was nothing but the iron nerve and the iron body of Bill Wilton that brought him back alive.


"All the summer long he worked the bars and got poor pay. His strength came back, and once in a while he laughed; but he was not the same Bill Wilton. He worshiped his wife, and when she was near appeared to have a sort of content; but when she left him he would sit and brood, and there was a light in his eyes that wasn't nice to see; a something of a

24 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

shadow, as if he had seen something, or his sufferings on that trip had branded his soul with a red iron—red as the gold he sought.

“ In the second winter he was restless, and would have gone again, I believe, had it not been for the protestations and pleadings of his wife, who was none too well. And another summer went by, and his moodiness and nervousness grew. He wasn't the cool, laughing Bill Wilton any more. He was a man maddened by a dream. And the dream was not for himself, but for what he might do if he found that ledge and laid its riches at his wife's feet. I credit him with that. He was a fool! He thought that it took gold to make her happy, and her happiness was his greatest ambition. You see, it had got on his mind, with its curse.

“ December came again, and he had nothing to do. Mac wanted him to work for the H. B., but he had an idea that his going to work would mean my discharge, and perhaps he was right. I never quite knew, save that I fancy old Mac would have let me go as coolly as if I were a condemned dog if it served his own aims. I wish I had reasoned it out sooner, and quit. I would have lived with the natives in a kazhga, or communal house, to have saved either Bill Wilton or his wife what followed. Yes, I'd



have walked into the storeroom, stripped a boot, and found the trigger of a rifle with my toe, to have saved her the suffering that came. For Bill Wilton grew more restless day by day, and went! This time she nearly fell to her knees on the snow, in a sort of hysterical agony, to restrain him. She sobbed, and patted his cheek, and clung to him, until he almost tore himself loose from her hands, and ran away after his yelping dogs as if the devil were driving him on, and without looking back.

“ Her father and I picked her up, and old Mac cursed his strange Scottish oaths, and told her not to make a fool of herself, and almost dragged her into the house. That is another day I shan’t forget!

“ In eight months after the dogs tore away over the snow, Bill Wilton was a father, and a widower! And on that dreadful night the withered old crone squatted on the doorstep of the pelt house, and rocked to and fro, and muttered: ‘ Gold! Devil’s gold! Red gold! The white man’s curse is come,’ until I drove her away. I was half mad myself. It was horrible! I had heard those agonized cries in the night, sounding through log walls, hour after hour, with no doctor within five hundred miles, and her life going out! Going out when it might

have been saved, if anyone had known how. And thus was Bessie born; off up there on a winter night when the stars seemed near and listening."

Cavanaugh's voice had dropped until it was scarcely audible. He seemed to be talking to himself, rather than to me, and for a long time he sat there, with his head drooped forward on his breast, and his hands hanging listless and inert by his sides. I respected the sorrow that I knew bridged in the unspoken sentences when he spoke of that woman whom he had loved, and who had so painfully parted soul and body on that far-gone night. His voice was dead level and old when he again took up his narrative, and he did not look at me, but rather into the shadows of the room, as if seeing ghosts of his youth.

"Wilton did not return. A native brought a letter which had been passed from hand to hand, running around by the way of Point Barrow on the northern coast of Alaska to St. Michael's, then up the Yukon, by slow stages, and, as if in travesty, it was addressed in its worn handwriting to his wife! To the wife that had been dead almost six months when it came. Old Mac and I tore it open, and read it together, one night in the trading post. Bill had

suffered God only knows what, but was now fighting against fate. He had wandered, and starved, and been rescued by some hunting natives when almost dead, taken to Point Barrow, got another outfit from the whalers after he had recovered his strength, and was going back. He said he thought he knew where it was, the red gold. And that he would either die or get it."

He suddenly leaned toward me, frowning through the gloom, and held me with his eyes and the suggestion of awe in his voice.

"Do you know what happened? That post had a barricade around the buildings. The gates had been locked that night, because some of the natives had taken to pilfering. It was almost midnight when we opened that letter and read it, and yet, when we had finished, the door opened, and into the room came that old squaw witch, with the frost falling around her in a shower as the warm air fought the draft of cold from without, and raised her hands! It is true!


"Clairvoyance you may call it, or something else. I don't know. I've never told this before to any living man, because most of them wouldn't understand, or would think me a liar; but I tell it to you because I believe you are

ready to listen to some things that one doesn't often mention. She was there in the doorway. How she got in, or over the stockade, I don't know. But she was there! She stood for a full half minute, and although I'm not superstitious, I felt the hair rise on my head. Old Mac sort of stood, with the letter in his hands, as if paralyzed, and he scowled at her with his hard, weather-beaten Scotch face.

" 'And he says he'll get it or die!' she croaked in her native tongue, which was as clear to us as our own. 'And he shall die! Not with the body, but with the mind! He will find it, and it is cursed. It shall be red, like blood, and it will burn his heart to a red ash.'

" Old Mac made a rush for her, white, cursing, and distraught. She spat at him venomously, held her hands up to ward him off with a dignity that made him cower back, and then the door shut with a bang, and she was gone. For a half minute we stood there looking at each other, and then, together, ran to the door, and pulled it open. The moon was in the full, and shone so bright, and cold, and white, that every building stood out.

" But the stockade was empty! The gates were shut, and we ran out to them to find them locked. I tore a key from my pocket, and my



fingers shook as I sprang the lock. We ran outside. There was nothing in sight save the unbroken snow. We ran around the stockade to see where she had gone. She had disappeared as if she had been a spirit, and I was glad to return and lock the gates.

“ It got on my nerves. Mac, I think, was a little affected, also, for I saw that his fingers were not steady when he unlocked the old strong box in the corner of the post, and laid Bill Wilton’s letter away with the other papers in the final drawer.

“ The next day I asked a native, who came in, where the old crone was. ‘ Gone,’ he answered. ‘ Been gone three months. Down river, maybe. Maybe dead.’

“ I don’t know about that, either. Perhaps he lied. Perhaps it was the truth, and what we saw was something else! Some spirit of the night. Some hallucination. But we saw it, MacCulloch and I. That I swear.

“ And we forgot about it, as men will forget, when the months went on, and we heard nothing more from Bill Wilton. Then one evening, in December again, two years after he had run down the trail with his dogs as if driven by the devil himself, a sled came jingling up to the door, and I saw the dogs come round the corner

of the post. They were strange dogs, trail worn, and the sled they dragged was different from the up-country sleds. It was a coast sled, such as the Inuits use, out on the Bering coast, more than a thousand miles away.

“ Behind them ran a man whose stature was such that I gave an exclamation, and hurried to open the door. It opened before I could reach it, and inside he stepped, ice-bearded, and shouting a boisterous welcome. Bill Wilton had returned.

“ ‘ It’s me, Cavanaugh,’ he called, and then he suddenly stopped and said: ‘ What’s the matter, man? What ails you? I’m no ghost! ’

“ I suppose something in the way I was standing there warned him. I suppose the knowledge of the blow I must deliver was mirrored in my attitude. His hands, which had evidently been badly frosted, and were heavily bandaged, fell to his sides, and he leaned his head forward and stared at me. The sounds of his team, outside, and the voice of a native, guttural, harsh, and tired, driving away the dogs of the post came faintly through the door. The old H. B. clock, ticking on the wall, had become a hammer beating a steel gong remorselessly.

“ ‘ My wife? ’ he whispered, and his voice had the soft sharpness of death itself whisper-

ing in a listening ear. 'My wife! Where is she? I thought I might find her here, waiting! Is she in the cabin?'

"I stood there for a long time, and then shook my head. I hated to give him his death-blow, and I was so surprised by his arrival, by his unexpected appearance, there in flesh and vigor, that I could not find words. Something must have told him. He backed step by step, tottering, until the logs of the wall stopped him, and his poor, bandaged hands went out until they rested wide behind him.

"'Dead! She's dead!' he said, and Heaven knows I hope never again to hear that profound agony in a human voice.

"I nodded acquiescence dully. Then suddenly he tore the bandages from his festering fingers where the skin had been killed by the icy cold of December, and lifted his maimed hands high up, and shook them at the blackened rafters above. I shuddered when I heard him curse life, omnipotence, and high Heaven itself. He was a living fury, venting his bravery on fate, and challenging the thunderbolts to blot out his life.

"He begged God to grant him death, and then abruptly reached up those grasping, hideous, bleeding fingers, and, with one fierce, tear-

32 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

ing clutch, tore his parka, mackinaw, and shirt wide, and dragged out a buckskin bag, sweat-stained. His fingers did not pause to untie it, but with maniacal strength appeared to rip the bag open, and with one sweeping throw of his arm he sent it and its contents out and over the floor.

“ He burst into cynical, bitter laughter, and then suddenly collapsed down the wall, a broken, wilted wreck of a mighty man, sobbing aloud with great, heartrending moans. And I, starting toward him, saw what he had thrown. The floor was littered with little nuggets of gold! And they glowed dully, malevolently! For they were red! Red as blood wrung from a tortured heart! ”

CHAPTER III

A NATIVE APPEARS

CAVANAUGH had arisen to his feet, and, after a broad gesture with his hands, held them extended, as if seeing there, before him, as on the rough floor of that older trading post far away, globules of gold, accursed. In the gloom of the post his eyes blazed and stared, and the muscles of his neck seemed tense and drawn. He appeared to recover himself, gave a foolish, mirthless little laugh, and began pacing up and down the room, with slow, aimless footsteps. I shuddered a little, for the spell of his story was still on me, and thought of the wreck of a good man, Bill Wilton, whose reason had been unbalanced by privation and a succession of blows, incomprehensible and deadly.

My memory appeared to find new details in his attitude as I saw him sitting on the bank, with the pebbles falling through his maimed fingers, the fingers that had cast away all that he had found. Vivid and clear, he stood before me there in the H. B. log post, stricken to the

heart, and perhaps remorsefully believing that had he not made the great quest, his wife might have survived.


“ So, you see, it had a foundation in truth ! ”

Cavanaugh had halted in front of me, and was again undisturbed.

“ He had found a deposit of red gold. He had lived to bring some of it back, as tangible evidence of its existence. He had traveled over hundreds of miles, buoyed up by hope and the belief that he was to throw in his wife’s lap the *magnum opus* of man’s striving, wealth—wealth to buy ease, comfort, and travel, time to gain knowledge, means to make a home somewhere in a less inhospitable clime. And she was not there to greet him, or to forgive him the feverishness of his rude, half-mad departure.

“ I left him huddled there against the foot of the wall, still moaning, and ran across to bring MacCulloch, telling him in broken, breathless sentences that Bill Wilton’s reason was ebbing, that it was at stake, and that something must be done for him. Mac snatched the baby from its rough, homemade crib, and we ran back and into the post.

“ Mac shouted to Wilton, who looked up, and slowly got to his feet, where he stood, wavering, and his fingers worked, shutting and unshut-



ting, and his lips twitched, and his eyes were blank and filmed, as if Death were invading him. Mac held the baby, Bessie, toward him; and she, recovering from the shock of her awakening from sleep, suddenly held her hands out toward her father, and smiled and gurgled with her sweet little voice.

“For an instant we thought the man was affrighted. He cowered back still farther, and then, as if we were wolves, and he feared for our hold of the baby, he seized her feverishly in his arms, and walked up and down the post. We hoped to see him break—hoped that the tears would swim in those fierce, glittering, dry eyes; but none came.

“He began to quaver in a far-away voice, as if detached from him, and bearing no relation to the big bell booms of sound that used to bubble from him in the old days, an Indian song from the southern coast. You know it, that coarse chant of

“Konwusky Nouka.
Tinki omlatuch!
Tinki omlatuch.
Konwusky nouka!

“The song of money in plenty, ask where! ”
I nodded my head, and Cavanaugh walked

slowly down to the end of the room, around some of the piles of merchandise that were heaped, dim and misshapen, in the lower end, and back up behind the counter, where he leaned against a string of beads that clashed and rattled. The light above shone more fully on his face, and it seemed to me to have become more sad in its lines.

“That’s about all there is to it,” he said, as if his tale were finished. “We never quite understood, for a long time, whether he realized that he was Bessie’s father; but he used to growl like a beast if anyone attempted to take her away from him, or to care for her. He used to sleep with her in his arms, and one night, when I had worked late on the monthly reports, and come into the big living cabin, and passed his door, it was open, and he was there beside her, resting on his elbows, and staring down into her face, as if trying to solve that puzzling problem of existence. In the summer he would carry her, for hours, in his arms. For two or three years he scarcely spoke to any of us, then he began to work a little, doing chores around the post.

“Only once a sign of the old feverishness came over him in full force. That was after I had left the post, and was working a patch

of poor placer ground up above. But I happened to be there. He had been restless for days, and on this afternoon came out into the open, with a huge pack before him, which he laid down, as if thinking of something forgotten. I tried to find out where he thought he was going, and all he did was to mutter that incoherent gibberish about red gold—red as blood.

“ I didn’t want to hurt him, and I knew that an attempt to overpower a man of such prodigious strength as was his, and especially as it might prove when fanned by madness, meant that I might have to wound him. So I ran back up past the post and called for Bessie. She came toddling toward me, and I picked her up in my arms, and ran almost blindly, in haste, back to where I had seen her father.

“ ‘ You must put your arms around his neck and say, “ Stay with Bessie. Don’t go! ” ’ I kept telling her, and she learned her little lesson. It worked. Bill Wilton rubbed his hands across his eyes, bewildered, as if the words had recalled something of his past, some other day, when he had been asked to stay, and had refused. I don’t think he could grasp that intangible memory; but he suddenly cried—and

Heaven knows it is pitiful to hear a strong man cry—carried his pack back inside the cabin, and was docile again.”

I sat for a time thinking of the tragedy of the mind, and was prompted to ask of the trader, still leaning against the partitions, and staring off into space: “ Did he have much of the gold—the red gold? ”

“ Yes, a fair sum—such as a man might escape with after such hardship. About three thousand dollars’ worth, I suppose. I have an idea that he tried to carry away more, but dropped it, little by little, as his strength failed in his flight to save his life. MacCulloch and I swept up about a hundred and forty ounces of it, and sent it away. We took the money and brought the best alienist from out in the States that our money would command, that he might say what was best to be done with the stricken man.”

“ And what did he say? ” I asked, filled with pity.

“ That it was no earthly use for us to send him to a sanitarium or asylum, and that none but God Himself could restore the mind of Bill Wilton. He thought it might come by accident, but even that hope has died as the years have advanced; for he is now about sixty years of

age, and the brain cells at his time of life are almost indurated."

Cavanaugh stopped speaking, shifted on his feet, and then walked around the counter again, and looked out into the long twilight of the night. Then, as if satisfied that we were still safe from intrusion, leaped over the rough pine boards, polished by contact to a lumpy smoothness, and stooped over his safe.

"I'll show you something," he said, standing erect. "But I don't want you to mention it to anyone. Sleeping dogs must be left to sleep. Look at this."

He fumbled through the contents of the drawer he had removed from the safe, and I saw a priceless gem tossed carelessly to one side, a bow of faded ribbon, a coin cut in half, a miniature in a yellow frame, and then, with an exclamation—"Here it is!"—he picked up a small wad of paper. He unrolled it carefully, and held something in the palm of his hand. It was a single nugget of gold, not heavily washed, for its edges were still sharp in places, and it glowed a dull and somber red.

"That's one of them," he said sententiously. "I have never seen anything like it. Have you?"

I did not answer. I was interested in its

curious color. It was as if it had been permeated with blood. Iron oxidization, perhaps, for such deposits have been found, though rarely. I recalled that down in Eldorado County, California, there was one small place where miners of the olden days tossed nuggets out of the sluice boxes because they were coated with red, to afterward learn that they had thrown away gold impregnated with iron in oxidization. But I had never seen that gold.

Perhaps this might be the same. I was not certain. And for some reason, it seemed to me that the nugget was evil, and that it burned the palm of my hand, and fascinated me, and was sentient. I gave it back, and caught myself furtively wiping my hand on my trousers leg, as if it had been stained by contact with that symbol of tragedy. It was as if there were truth in the Indian legend that it was accursed, and that it brought grief to all who came in contact with it.

Quite as carefully as he had removed it, the trader replaced it. His voice came to me as he knelt down, and locked the inner compartment of the safe.

“ MacCulloch handled some of it. It set him to brooding over the heavy blow dealt his family. He neglected his business, and left it to a

young fellow sent out from the head offices. When that boy was shot by one of the Northwest Mounted Police, who found him in his own home with a wife betrayed, the boy's defalcations came to light. It cost old Mac every dollar he had saved, for the H. B. is unbending. His half-breed wife went out one night with heart disease, and Mac, poor old chap, was drowned trying to save a crippled dog."

Cavanaugh suddenly stood up, and blew out the light above—his face appearing old and distressed as its rays shone on him, standing tiptoe, to extinguish its flame. I knew that he was dismissing me, and walked slowly outside, and stood by the door. His movements were subdued until he stood beside me, and turned and fumbled with the big iron key that locked his fortress. The camp was still, and the air was still, with the long, hazy, gentle stillness of a summer's night in the Northland.

For a time we stood there, and looked at the river winding below us toward the buttresses of the Ramparts, and it seemed to me that the water was smoothing itself for that swift rush through the rock-bordered channel. I was filled with a strange love of the country which could be so hospitable in its lazy summer mood, and such a fierce, rigid contestant in its winter sol-

42 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

stice. The voice of old Cavanaugh aroused me:

"Pretty, isn't it? Does it hold you, entice you, enthrall you, as it does me?"

I told him that it did, and for another minute he stood and looked around him, and drew deep inhalations, as if clearing his lungs of the mingled odors emanating from the storehouse where he passed his days. Evidently he was in no mood for further words, for he bade me a curt "Good-night," and turned away toward his cabin, which huddled in the rear of the big log structure over which he presided. He suddenly turned and called to me:

"Oh, Amann! Amann! Just a minute."

I had started along the trail leading past the river-fronting row, but halted. He came toward me with his long, sturdy step, and laid a hand on my arm.

"Don't forget to say nothing about the nugget," he cautioned. "Men believe it a mere childish legend, and that Bill Wilton never found anything to prove it otherwise. Don't be so reckless as to start a stampede to unknown places, even if there is nothing in—well—in the native superstition. It is best that men, especially these tenderfeet, continue to believe it a myth."

I agreed with him, and gave my word, even

as I gave my hand in good-night. He turned and walked away, and I resumed my march to the cabin where my partner, honest and tired, doubtless slept the sleep of the hard-worked.

Here and there along the row the lights still flared. From the Honolulu came the steady click of the white ball chasing itself languidly across the brass partitions of the roulette wheel, and I heard the bang of a case as a faro deal was finished, and the casekeeper flipped his little buttons back for a fresh start. Farther down the line a woman's voice, drink-coarsened, attempted a song, and the remnant of her contralto broke dolefully when she came to the changes in her meager register. A door of a cabin on the hillside opened and shut, and a man with a pack on his back plunged out, and started into the trail leading off toward the diggings, which lay three miles back of the river camp, his frying pan and coffee pot clanking as he went.

I halted when I came to the front of our cabin. The door was open, as if my partner scorned its frail barrier against anyone who cared to invade it. I started to enter, and then had a sudden disinclination for sleep. The story of the red gold was still overpowering my fatigue, and I turned down and loitered

along the river bank, passing slowly, farther and farther, until I was near the place where the Marook came brawling across its shallows to empty its limpid waters into the yellow current of the Yukon. The light was turning again from a heavy dusk, somnolent and soporific, to the paler gold of an Arctic dawn—and there is nothing in the world more beautiful.

From up the river I saw something shaping itself upon its breast. It forged ahead, and I saw that it was a boatman in a native canoe. The paddle rose and fell with steady, dignified deliberation. Evidently the man was in no haste, and was not familiar with his landing place. He was almost abreast of me, when he appeared to evince curiosity as to who I was. He swung his paddle vigorously on the far side, and the canoe's nose, supple, turned toward me, and halted almost when the pebbles of the beach threatened to rend its lower hull.

A native of splendid stature leaped out, his mukluks splashing the water, and with paddle retained in one hand, with the other he caught his craft by its upturned nose, and held it secure. His denim parka, of a common cut, whose resemblance to a long shirt I had long ceased to be interested in, was without trimming, and open at the throat, and hoodless. His

pillarlike legs, standing firmly, were surrounded by the waters which rippled and fought against them in little swirls.

His face was turned toward me, and I saw that the nose was high and strong, that the eyes were sharp and inquiring in their somber depths, and that his cheek bones were rounded rather than abrupt. His hair had been shorn away until it fell in an even line at the base of his neck, and he was bareheaded, with a parting line distinctly outlined up to the crown of his head. There was something aggressive about him, some primitive dignity different from the ordinary pose of the Arctic native.

“ Neucloviat? ” he asked.

“ Yes.”

“ Good! ”

He stepped back into his canoe, and, with one heavy, deft stroke, sent it clear of the shore, and, without looking back at me, began paddling diagonally across the river. I knew that he was heading for the Indian village on the opposite bank, and smiled when I thought of his sparse conversation; but there was something about him that caused me to be more thoughtful, to treat our interview as of more importance. It was as if he were a force com-

46 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

manding something from me, and from that primitive country of which he was a part.

And as he disappeared I went back to our cabin, to drop to sleep, exhausted, in my bunk, and to dream of tragedies, nameless and overpowering, in all of which there gleamed the ruddy nuggets.



CHAPTER IV

THE MINER, THE GAMBLER, AND THE GIRL

I RECALL now, as if they all occurred in a flash, the happenings of Neucloviat; and yet summer waned, the brief fall came, and winter was on us before they were complete, and I felt myself an integral part of the new camp hanging there on the river's brim. I see the forgotten faces, I laugh over the humorous lights, I frown at the somber ones.

The taciturn Indian, Pitkok, seems always present in those months, as he stalked gigantic and sullen across the scene. Sam Barstow is there, taciturn also, unlucky, dangerous, and credited with being an honest wolf, if such an anomaly may be. I see the iron gray of his hair, the conquering nose, the sweeping mustache, the hard eyes, and the lithe, nervous swing of his shoulders. Spider Riggs, the gambler, suave, rapacious, crafty, and insolent, a camp Lothario who prided himself on escapades which add to a blackguard's reputation for conquest. Marie Devinne, of doubtful an-

cestry, vivacious, French Canadian, and silly, flitting as a cheerful butterfly across the days, dancing as a cheerful will-o'-the-wisp at nights, elusive, fickle, and tempestuous. And, most important, but not lost to life or association, the irrepressible Kentucky Smith, boyish, reckless, and handsome, with a laugh that won hearts, a smile that conquered, and a fearlessness that commanded respect.

“That’s Pitkok,” Dan said to me on the day after I saw the arrival of the native *voyageur*, pointing a grimy finger at the Indian. “The devil’s in that Siwash. They say he’s a Koyukuk, and that he’s got the trail fever. Looks like it to me. I saw him down at Juneau one fall, when I was on the Treadwell. Then he was at Cassiar before you came there. I reckon that was where he learned the two wickedest things in the world—what gold is worth, and how *hutch* makes you feel if you can get enough of it. He gambles with the other bucks, and a sealer told me he hunted with a schooner one year, and gambled away all his wages. Windy Jim says he met him one season down in the hop fields of Oregon, and Billy Blatchford says the King’s Islanders know and hate him. So he’s sure traveled some!”

“But what brings him here?” I wondered,

taking another look at the man I had seen land.

“ Because he can’t go back to his own tribe ! ” chuckled my partner. “ He knows too much and—well—he’s a bad egg. He’s up to something, you can be sure.”

I forgot that conversation as the weeks passed, until the night when Bessie Wilton brought Pitkok back to my mind. I had got into the habit of visiting her cabin every night, and looking forward to the evening through every day’s work. We had arrived at terms of warm friendship, at least, and so were sometimes confidential.

“ That Pitkok was in at the post to-day,” she said, one evening, “ and he was just as ugly as ever. He was right angry with me because I wouldn’t trust him for an outfit, and was angrier still with Uncle Cav because he wouldn’t let him have about a year’s supplies. Uncle Cav almost put him out; but he is a dear, and scarcely ever loses his temper, so it all passed over, like a summer thunder shower.”

I don’t know why it was that a piece of gossip so trivial impressed itself on me, but it did, and afterward I had better cause to remember it. I sat thinking of it when Bess rallied me on my silence, and demanded that I tell her what

50 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

studies were pursued by young ladies who passed through Wellesley, or Bryn Mawr.

“Not that I’ve any idea of going, for a while,” she said, laughing. “It takes money, in the first place; and, in the second, I don’t think father would like it.”

Her voice broke with a little, pathetic laugh, which hurt, and she looked out into the other room, where Bill Wilton was laboriously adding another patch to his summer parka.

“Yes,” she sighed, as if answering my curious question at his needlework, “that is one of his peculiarities. He will neither permit me to do his sewing, nor to buy new clothing for him. When he wants anything he appears down at the post, refuses to do business with me, and buys from Uncle Cav, assuring him that sooner or later he is going to pay his bill, as soon as he feels well enough to go prospecting again.”

I wanted to change the subject, for I knew that it was a constant wound to her, a constant sorrow.

“But about some college?” I said. “Is it so hopeless that you can never go to one? It doesn’t require so much money, in these days.”

Her face brightened, and she laughed tolerantly.

“ I don’t know why I should give you any confidence,” she replied, “ but, on the other hand, I don’t know why I shouldn’t. I don’t even know how much money I have. And I can’t find out. I asked Uncle Cav once, as he stands like a guardian—almost like a father—to me, and he said for me not to bother my head about it. He explains that there is just income enough so that all the bills are always being paid, and that I owe nothing, and once in a while he insists that if I need any more money than I am getting, he can arrange to get it from the estate, whatever it is.”

Her face took on that all-too-frequent reflection of sorrow as she paused for a moment, and said softly, as if fearing the sound might be audible to the ears of her father :

“ You see, it can’t amount to very much, for it is simply an investment of the gold father brought back on that last expedition, and he couldn’t have carried much, from all that can be learned of that trip. I know from what he has said at times that he was starving when he was rescued, and that the triplet peaks, as he always calls them, lay far behind.”

I nodded my head, and fell to silence again, a mood which she seemed to share, for she, too, sat staring vacantly at her open books. I was


52 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

filled with a sudden increase of admiration for Cavanaugh, the trader. I understood at once, from her words, that he had lied to her like a gentleman through all the years of her life, and kept from her the knowledge that both she and her father were absolutely dependent on him for every dollar they had ever had since that unfortunate end to the quest for gold. He had preserved for her, delicately, her independence, even while he educated her, and directed her mind, and, as a last thoughtfulness, had found work for her in his trading post, so that she might have no time to brood.

I comprehended more fully that the white-headed gentleman of the wilderness was no ordinary man, and mentally I blessed him. I wondered then, and have often done so since, at the great love he must have sustained for the girl's mother; but that was, and is, a closed chapter; for Cavanaugh, faithful, never referred to it further than the suggestion conveyed when he told me that night in the post that he loved the daughter of old MacCulloch.

"There was an ole nigger an' his name was Uncle Ned,
An' he died long, long ago-o-o."

A careless, singing voice, musical and happy, floated through the closed door, followed by the



clumping of boots over the frozen hummocks of the trail, and Bessie lifted her head and smiled.

"There comes Kentucky," she exclaimed, and rose to her feet, and hurried to open the door—too eagerly, I thought; for the irrepressible Kentucky Smith was too popular with her to suit my own ideas.

"Shrieking as usual!" she laughed.

And I heard his hearty: "Sure! Why not, honey? It makes folks know you're happy."

"But the song is doleful," she retorted. "For instance, the line about taking pills through his nose, and his inability to masticate hoe cake because he was *sans* teeth."

He came stamping into the outer room of the cabin, gave the patient old Wilton a slap on the back and a kindly greeting, and then stood in the doorway looking at me.

"Hello, Tom!" he said heartily. "You here again. Say, man, I'm gettin' jealous of you-all. I sure am! If I don't look out this Miss Bessie will be falling head over——"

She brushed past him, and put her hands on his lips, and he tore them away to vent his fine, free laugh, then came forward and put his hand out to me. There was a splendid exuberance about him, a splendid youth, that was com-

elling. He was lithe and well set, his movements were graceful, and his face was winning. He had fine brown eyes, and heavy brown hair that, when "mussed up," as he called it, never appeared less becoming to the well-rounded forehead and good brow.

I had come to regard him with a certain jealousy, and yet I liked him. My own inability to hold light conversation, my own seriousness, I knew, made me anything but a pleasant chance companion, and the foolish little name bestowed upon me by Miss Wilton in the first weeks of our acquaintance, "Old Mister Sobersides," I felt, bitterly, was well merited.

"Everything's goin' to the bad in this camp," he said dolefully, as he dropped into one of the rough chairs, comfortably blanketed with a white bearskin. "Old Cavanaugh had to bust in at the Horn Spoon, and spoil what promised to be a lovely fight. Sam Barstow was about to lam some fellow from Dawson for dancin' too many times with Marie Devinne! Ha, ha, ha!"

He threw his head back, and laughed with loud enjoyment.

"That little Marie certainly leads Sam something of a hurdle race, all right. She knows that Sam's crazy about her, and I reckon she

thinks a heap of him, right down in her silly little insides; so she leads Sam up to the fool trough every once in a while, and then laughs when he drinks."

"Care for Sam? Her? Pshaw!" Bessie exclaimed. "What big fools men can be! That girl is the silliest, most heartless, frivolous girl in any dance hall in the North. Didn't she stick to Panamint Jones, up at Circle City, only as long as his money lasted? Didn't she promise that Norwegian to marry him after he came down from Stewart River, and everyone thought he had made a strike, and then, when it proved worthless, drop him as if he were hot iron?"

Kentucky laughed tolerantly.

"But my-oh, how she can dance!" he exclaimed enthusiastically, as if to arouse Bessie to further argument. "Lordee! I certainly do love to waltz with that girl."

"Humph!" was all the answer he got, and she turned to me, and began addressing all her conversation in my direction, as if purposely ignoring the enthusiasms of the Kentuckian, who winked at me gravely, and in pauses of the conversation continued to deliver a panegyric on the excellencies of the dance-hall girl.

Bessie finally drove us away, with the asser-

tion that she had to study the books given her by Cavanaugh, and, at the door, somewhat pointedly gave me a warm invitation to come up any evening when I chose, but ignored Kentucky, who stood shaking with suppressed laughter by my side.

“ You-all don’t need to invite me,” he said. “ I’ll come anyhow, unless you lock your doors. I’m certainly too much in love with this family to——”

The door banged shut, and he doubled over hilariously, and then said: “ Wow! That ends my sweet discourse for this evenin’, brethern! ” and led the way down the hillside. The lights were beginning to flame in the North, and the crisp air of the season was around us as we walked down toward the squat cabins below us, resting like distorted shapes, asleep, under the stars.

“ I like to get a rise out of her,” he said, after we had stumbled halfway down the hill. “ But she’s right. That Marie Devinne is a little devil. And she’ll make Sam Barstow look like a sucker yet, before she’s through with him. Poor cuss! That feller’s got too many dark horses runnin’ in his head, to stand for too much. He’s a simple sort, but I’ve noticed that when his kind go, they go hard. Either mighty

bad, or mighty good. I'm right shy of him, myself, and yet they say he's on the level."

He had almost voiced my own thoughts, and I was still thinking of his careless summary, when we turned into the Horn Spoon, to see what it held of interest. It was smoke-filled, and man-filled. The bar in front was doing its full share of business, and the glasses, piled in front of the American flag and the mirror, which had done more than its share of service on some cheap dresser top, were diminished in number.

The bartender, wearing a white hat and blue glasses to shade his eyes, was steadily twisting the *hutchnu* bottle backward and forward, and his arms were wet up to the point where his blue flannel shirt sleeves were rolled below his elbows. His long, black necktie had become untied, and was trailing forlorn ends downward until he could find time to adjust them.

Back on the left-hand side of the room two faro layouts and a wheel were also liberally patronized, and in front of one of the faro tables Marie Devinne, with her white hat, dented, and banded by a red ribbon, was keeping the cases. Big Jim, a familiar character, with a crude eyeshade pulled over his forehead to protect his eyes from the glare of the smoke-

clouded oil lamps above, was dealing, and Frank Smith, calm and unmoved, sat in the "lookout" chair, smoking and watching the play to arbitrate errors.

Behind Marie, and leaning across her, to place his bets as his fancy dictated, towered Sam Barstow, black-faced, and evidently playing in poor luck. Apparently the unpleasantness of the evening had passed away.

At the other table sat Spider Riggs, chalk-faced, furtive, immaculate; and watching the game were camp friends of mine—Sturgis, and Coen, and Atkins, Hopkins, Beaton, and Buckingham, Welch, and Crowley, and McCabe. Where are you all now?

And back in the far corner, leaning against the logs, and with folded arms, as if watching the whole scene disdainfully, stood Pitkok, the Indian, with his bright eyes flashing here and there, a picture of devilment and jealousy. I was caught by his attitude and scowl. The man envied these white trespassers for their cloak of masterfulness, and yet hated them all.

A guitar, a mandolin, and a flute, took up a dismal attempt at the Zenda waltzes, the sound coming in a jumble from the other far corner of the room, and the four women in the place suddenly got to their feet, and accepted prof-

ferred partners, and went whirling around the room in the cleared space reserved for dancing.

The games went on monotonously, the click of the ball on the wheel rising to a sharp clatter, and then dying away to slow, diminishing, and individual thuds. The chips clicked as they changed hands, symbols of changing money, and the smoke continued to rise and cloud the lamps as it wreathed itself spirally upward through the chimney openings of the bright tin reflectors. The clink of glasses and bottles thrown deftly along the bar continued unceasingly, and the only punctuations were the muttered exclamations of the losers or winners, and the rising voices of some of those who had imbibed.

Familiar as it all was, I had a sudden premonition that underneath all its recklessness there was an undernote of tragedy—a tragedy of the Northland, that was to involve me in its diapason when it came.

CHAPTER V

MALICULA, THE DOG

It comes to me that in this grim tale of mine I have neglected two of those actors who were, later, to play a most important part in my life—one a leading rôle, the other an able support. And these characters are but dogs. Gentlemen both, and I do hereby pay you my respects!

The first snows had fallen when I met them under circumstances attributable to accident only, so odd are the little meetings that constitute Fate. Dan and I had bought a claim on the most promising gulch in the vicinity of Neucloviat—a gulch called Little Marook, down which wandered a small stream, gleeful and boisterous in summer, and frozen to its bed in winter. Laboriously we had built a cabin for our winter quarters, carrying on our backs the small supplies necessary for that work; but now that the serious needs of steady work were facing us, we decided that we must have dogs to freight our supplies for the long closed sea-

son. There were but few freighters in the camp, and their charges, owing to the inrush, promised to be exorbitant. We were poor, after the purchase of our claim, and had need to economize. Could we but buy dogs, we thought they would prove a good investment.

I voiced this to Cavanaugh, who merely laughed.

“If you wanted dogs you should have bought them a long time ago,” said that sage counselor. “There’s scarcely a dog worth having in this whole country that has not been bought long before this. Dogs will be worth their weight in gold before this year is over. I don’t know of any for sale; but I’ll ask the natives when they come in if there are any.”

He did, and his judgment was confirmed. All that he could learn was that dogs were more valuable than gold at that season of the year and that any man who had them was unwilling to sell until the first rush of freighting for the coming winter season was finished. Nothing could have been more unsatisfactory, inasmuch as it was for the beginning of the season that we, like all men on outlying gulches, wanted dogs. Later there would be scant time for freighting. Supplies were a demand of the moment, and when the colder weather came, time

would be too valuable. The work of the prospecting and mining would require every hour. Dan and I gave up, reluctantly, and decided to try to contract for the hauling of freight.

It fell to me to cross the river to the native village to make some such arrangement, and that day is quite unforgettable. The river ran sullenly beneath my boat as I pulled across to the opposite shore, fighting now and then through tougher "scum ice" that had formed in the night. Rain and sleet had alternated, and now there was the first permanent offering of snow on the ground, rendering the atmosphere chill and dreary. The smoke from the native huts, as I approached, hung heavily as if loath to venture upward. The village appeared lifeless and melancholy as it squatted on the bank above in the little clearing where the scrub pines had been chopped away in desultory fashion to meet the demands for fuel. The native dogs howled lugubriously, stilled now and then by a sharp and guttural command when some door opened to expose a head. The children did not seem to be playing with their accustomed carelessness, and I wondered what pall could have fallen over the tiny settlement. I was not long in finding the reason.

As my boat swung up toward the bank, and

the howls of the dogs changed to shrill yelps of warning, an Indian came out of the nearest cabin and sauntered toward the bank. He watched me tie the boat, showing but languid interest, and puffing at a cigarette meanwhile as if it were of far greater concern than any mission I might have.

"Anybody here who wants to do some freighting?" I demanded, turning toward him.

"Not this day," he answered, with admirable brevity. "Man dead. Squaw feel plenty bad. Put him on poles back there."

He pointed through the trees, and off in the distance I could see the burial scaffold, shining new and bright against the green and white background. Two bucks were adjusting the sacrificial sled on top of it, and a flutter of bright-hued rags showed plainly that they had been but newly hung. The crude box of pine, evidently patched up from packing cases, and holding all that was left of some trailer gone to rest, completed the picture.

"You come, maybe two sleeps," added the native, indicating two nights' rest with the familiar gesture made by placing the hand beside the head and closing the eyes twice, "then somebody talk."

I stood for a moment, and confess to feeling

more annoyance for the delay, than sympathy for the bereaved, before I faced my boat. I knew the futility of attempting to induce a native to listen to me or accept employment at such a time. Already I had reached my hand out to untie the knot of my line, when, half-idly, I again spoke to the native who loitered above me.

“ Any chance to buy a few dogs here? ” I asked.

“ Maybe one. One dog, one devil,” was the response.

I stopped my handling of the knot, then re-tied it. The native still stood above me and now tossed away the short stub of a cigarette which he had burned to the very blistering point. As he made no move to come closer, I climbed back up to him.

“ What do you mean? ” I asked. “ One dog that’s a devil, or two dogs? ”

“ Two,” he answered, gravely holding up two fingers. “ One dog very good. One dog very dam bad.”

“ How much for the good one? ” I demanded, questioning whether it was worth my time to go and inspect the good beast.

The Indian shook his head, and prepared to roll a second cigarette before he spoke.

“Belong dead man,” he said. “Maybe his woman sell. Me no know.”

“Go and ask her, can’t you?” I demanded, losing a little of my patience at his stupidity.

“Maybe she sell, maybe not. Me no know,” he added imperturbably. “Dead man come down river with woman six sleeps by. Him very sick. Him die. Woman got people here. You got money?”

“Show me the good dog,” I said, in desperation, and he turned and led the way up the bank and back through the village where subdued and dirty children stared at us, a squaw or two opened doors to peer out, and everything was given over to inertia.

Suddenly, as the native turned the corner of a cabin, he jerked back with every evidence of caution, and an angry snarl told the reason.

“Devil dog,” he said in explanation. “Me look for good one.”

I stepped to the corner of the cabin and looked at the cause of his fear, and then walked farther in amazement; for there, chained to a tree, was the most magnificent malemute I had ever seen. Unlike his reception of the native, he did not lunge at me, but stood there eying me from eyes as yellow as fire opals. His splendid ruff was raised, his ears laid back, and

his fangs showed from between his drawn black lips. White and keen they were, and as dangerous as ever displayed by timber wolf, from which he seemed to have sprung. Somehow he reminded me of that picture of Landseer's stag—the one with the splendid breast, for across his broad front, from the throat downward, the hair was long and white, shading back to the gray of his sides. Were it not for the massive head and heavier limbs he might have resembled a finely bred collie. There were power and intelligence in every line of body and head. He stood a marvelous specimen of the malemute bred into the wolf, a method which the natives have from time immemorial employed. Yet he was, like many instances of this unscientific crossing, bred too far into the wild. I could readily see why the natives feared him, yet I longed to possess that dog.

“What name?” I asked my guide, who had drawn back some five or ten paces behind me.

“Malicula. Dead man raise. Nobody else can touch. Him devil. Me kill him bime-by!”

I stood and stared at the outcast for a few minutes, and it seemed to me that he began to tolerate my presence, for, finally, when I made

no move, he lowered his ruff, and quietly stretched himself out with his big gray head on his paws, eying me steadily, however, to show that all mistrust had not vanished.

“Where’s the good dog?” I asked, facing the native.

He motioned with his arm to the side of a cabin, quite close to the chained Malicula. There, lying near as if wanting the friendliness of none of the village dogs, rested another, and he too was of good size; but plainly with less of the wolf strain.

“Barsick!” shouted the native, and the dog by the cabin got up and came toward us. I fondled his head and ears, and then and there made the resolution that I must have those two animals as the nucleus for a team. The native brought the widow, who promptly forgot her grief when it came to bargaining. I bought Barsick for seventy-five dollars, which was an exceptionally reasonable price for those times, and then asked what she would take for his mate. She shrugged her shoulders and said, “One dollar. Maybe two. Whatever give. Him kill you, maybe.” And for that honesty I paid her twenty-five more for the chance of conquering that splendid animal with the evil reputation.

Dogs and I have always been friends. I believe I know them. I had never been bitten by one, a peculiarity which some human beings seem to possess, and I am not afraid of them. Hence, to the amazement of the villagers who had come out, I walked unconcernedly up to the chain holding Malicula, untied it without appearing to notice him, and with Barsick in leash, led my purchases down the river bank and into the boat. I am not certain whether it was mere surprise at my temerity, or recognition of mastery, that made the big wolf-dog submit without a fight; but come he did, and appeared not in the least loath to quit the village.

He followed me as I got out of the boat, never so much as pulling either ahead or back on his chain, and I put him in durance until we could find whatever other dogs we could to make up a team. Cavanaugh came down to look at my purchase, led thither by my enthusiastic description, and shook his head grimly.

“Too much wolf,” he declared. “Watch him every minute. I’m afraid you can’t tame him.”

“But if I can?”

“Then you will have the best dog of his kind in the world!” he declared. “But mark me,

unless you do tame him, he will tame you. If ever he gets hungry and you have him on the trail——”

He made a suggestive sound, and ran his hand up to his throat.

“ Snake Jim had a team of them. Snake Jim went out from Forty Mile one cold day for a long trip. He never came back, but we found his bones and saw his leader in a pack of wolves that we shot to pieces up near Selkirk. That’s what happens to a man with those dogs, when he has a few starvation camps. Look out, Tom. He’s bad. You might have done better to let the native do as he said, kill him! Believe me, they know! ”

But nevertheless Dan and I borrowed the trader’s dogs to make out a team, and when the trail began to show signs of hardening, started to freight our outfit to the distant gulch. I confess to a certain anxiety on the occasion when first I threw a harness over Malicula’s head and hitched him, with Barsick, next to the sled, thus making “ Wheel dogs ” of them; but he submitted, and, save for lifting his lips to a snarl and menacing me with his eyes, made no objection. He was a wonderful team dog, but worked with head turned back now and then to express a certain questioning defiance, that

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rather upset me. Dan refused to go near him, and every man we met warned us. Natives stopped to shrug their shoulders, and the *loup-garou* of the North could have achieved no more evil reputation than this noble beast already possessed.

It was old Marook who warned me with the first sensible words, and, wise old Indian that he was, he knew.

“Some day,” he said, “thee dog will try you. Then, either you or heem be master. Maybe so you have to shoot to save bein’ keel.”

A week went by, filled with hard work, and I grew more accustomed to that strange questioning defiance; yet I knew, always, that Marook had told the truth. In that week we traveled continually backward and forward over the ever hardening trail, and one night I risked chance with my wolf-dog, and left him untied. When I threw the team their rations of dog salmon, he seized his and carried it to the outskirts of the snarling pack. He observed a gentleman’s etiquette, and when his fish was finished, did not leap at any other dog’s food in that greedy fashion which characterizes dogs of the North; but calmly lay down and watched them—and me. Whichever way I turned his wolf eyes were on me. Barsick

had become a fast friend, but his mate cared nothing apparently for friendly overtures. Nor had I ever dared extend a hand to him in caress.

He did not desert us that night, as we both thought he might, but was there and ready for the harness and the day's work on the following morning, and I was gratified. Yet it was that very night in which we two were to have our battle.

I came out to the chopping log, tired from the day's work, to split off some kindling, and he lay there within reach of the falling sticks. It may be that I had grown careless, or that I had learned to regard him as merely surly. Anyhow, I spoke to him sharply where he lay curled up on the chips, with his eyes watching me, and he did not obey.

"Very well," said I, "stay there! And if a stick hits you, it will be your own fault."

The first stick split off fell within a foot of him, yet he made no move. The second came closer, struck on its end, bounced over, and fell against him. Almost before I could drop the ax he uncoiled like a spring of potential energy, appeared to leap from his position with the swiftness and certainty of a rattlesnake, and launched himself at my throat. The battle was

on! I seized a stick as I dodged, and he doubled back at me, trying again for that deadly throat hold. This time I barely evaded his attack, and had scant time to plant my feet before he had whirled and, with the rapidity of light, had charged me from the other side. I struck at him, and the stick slipped from my hand.

Up to then I had been fearless, scornful, certain. Now I knew that Marook's words were true. Either Malicula or I would quit that duel master, and in that wavering moment, when that huge, lithe animal was preparing for another spring, I was not confident which it would be—man or beast. It seemed to me that the velocity with which he launched himself would carry me from my feet if he landed, and I twisted sidewise. He was too intelligent for a repetition of that move. He was fighting grimly and with all the determination of his wolf ancestors when intent on a kill; so he twisted in mid-air to meet my shift, and was on me. Some deftness of hand, learned through my years of athletic exercise, prompted me to clutch quickly toward his throat. My hands met below that cutting lower jaw, desperately grasped hold, and clung. Down we went together, man and wolf-dog, in a battle to a

finish. His strength was prodigious, his agility incredible. He was like compact and yet living steel—always coiled and always deadly—as we rolled over and over on the ground. Sometimes his hot breath was in my face, his snapping fangs within an inch of my throat, his tearing paws scarring my wrists and hands. The battle was no longer for mastery; it was for self-preservation on my part. All that I knew was that, come what wounds might, I must not lose my hold on that throat.

In the midst of that fierce struggle, little by little, I closed my fingers tighter until they restricted that heavy throat with sufficient strength to throttle. Even when I was beneath him that one action was uppermost in my mind as the one that must be adhered to. He weakened and struggled to free himself. I clung and gripped the harder. It was my turn to be on top. I planted a knee on the broad breast between his legs and held him. I shifted my weight until I was seated on those rending haunches, and then, a mad man almost, I slowly shifted my grip until the throat was suppressed with but one hand. I saw fear in his eyes for the first time. I reached out and caught the only weapon at hand, a dog chain, which was twisted as I reached it. I regretted that it

74 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

was not an ax, for which to this day I am thankful.

Reduced to the primitive, the elemental, with centuries dropped off when man and beast fought as we fought, man becomes but little better than an animal. I whipped the chain up and down with all my strength, hoping, furiously, fervently, to kill him with it. Time and again I brought the heavy weight crashing down on him until, abruptly, he lay inert under my hand, and, panting, I staggered to my feet.

All the revulsion of humanity for a cruel deed waved back over me as I stood there and the centuries were again bridged. I was no longer the cave man, but the civilized being, sorry for my part of that strange conquest. For an instant, weak and calming, I stood and looked at him. He lay there, bloody and inert, on the pile of chips beside the stick of kindling wood that had led to the test.

I stooped over and lifted him in my arms, and carried him, heavy burden that he was, into the cabin. My partner looked up as we entered, and the smile on his face died away.

“For Heaven’s sake! What’s the matter?” he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. And then, “Ah, had it out, did you? For the love of God,

Tom, take that timber wolf out and put a bullet through his head! I was afraid of it. It had to come."

I laid Malicula on the floor of the cabin, and for a minute or two leaned against the rough log walls. My vanquished foe lay there at my feet, and Dan reached for a rifle on the wall, took down a cartridge belt, slipped a couple of cartridges into the chamber, and whirled around.

"No!" I said weakly. "No! Don't do that! Let me handle him. The fight was mine, not yours."

Slowly he replaced the rifle on the wall after ejecting the cartridges.


"But it's the best thing to do," he insisted. "That is a wolf; not a dog. He'll kill one of us yet. Don't take a chance, old man."

Despite his protests, I stooped over and ministered to the wounds I had inflicted in my anger. I cut the hair from them, poured diluted carbolic acid into them, and stitched them up, painfully, while the great gray beast lay there beneath my hands, unwhimpering, and bore in silence the hurt. Regardless of Dan's derision, I took the blanket from my own bed to lay him on, close beside the stove. My own coat covered him, and shielded him from the

cold. My own self-reproaches, and pity for a worthy and fearless foe, surrounded him as I left him to his rest.

For several days he was too stiff and sore, and bruised, to protest against my ministrations; yet I knew that we were to be friends. Daily I lavished care on him, and daily he watched me, never whimpering, seeming to court my hands, and for the first time submitting to a caress. I have never nursed anything which I more wanted to live than I did Malicula. And then, one day, of his own volition, he turned and licked my hand, expressing in his way the compact of peace.

There are those to whom this will sound sentimental, brutal, or strange; yet I vow to them that there are souls in dogs; that some dogs are sub-human; that most dogs understand with an intelligence of their own. There are those who will laugh when I say that I had a thrill of happiness on a later day when Malicula, awaiting my return to the cabin, suddenly reared up on his hind feet, lifted his great length up until we were face to face, put his front paws on my shoulder, and attempted to lick my face. That laugh does not matter, for then I knew that we were friends, and my story tells that the loyalty of that friendship, brought



about by the stern test of trial, was worth while. Men and dogs are alike in this, that always, forever, someone must be the master, and the other the follower. And so it was that Malicula came into the woof of the tale of red gold!

CHAPTER VI

BARSTOW PLAYS BIG STAKES

WINTER seized us. My partner and I worked the claim, and yet, three times a week, and usually accompanied by Dan, I made the long trip to the camp; for the greatest ambition I had conceived, the greatest hope in life, lay in having Elizabeth Wilton tell me that she loved me. Thirty years of age, matured, unscarred, I had been drawn into the vortex of love, where everything but the ultimate is lost sight of, and paltry. Three times a week I made that long trip over the trail, that I might hear her voice, and watch the shadows in her hair, the light in her eyes, and the graceful mobility of her lips.

And many events had happened, trivial in themselves, but distinct and of note to one living in a camp so far removed from the outside world that letters came but once a year, and everything was bounded by what could be seen on the horizon, and the day's work.

Early in the fall the constant companionship

of Sam Barstow and Pitkok had been observed, and commented on. It was an unusual thing for a white man to take up with a native in those days.

"I tell you," Dan was wont to assert, "there's somethin' back of it all that we ain't on to. That Pitkok's a devil! I know him. Sam was all right, as far as anybody knows, until he came down the river. He works, and he wants to get ahead. But what does he mix up with that big buck for? Why, the Koyukuks won't have nothin' to do with him, and when an Injun's own tribe throws him out, there's somethin' mighty bad about him. You just wait! You'll see!"

But the strange companionship had continued, and it had ended by their going away together one night, in which direction no one knew—not even the natives of the low-lying village across the river. That they went together I knew from something that Bessie told me on one of my visits.


"Sam Barstow has gone away with Pitkok," she said, as if she, too, had noted the strange partnership. "You remember I told you, one time, oh, months ago, that Pitkok came into the post, and wanted credit for a big outfit? Well, it was right after that he and Sam began to be

seen together. Now, it was Sam over in the Indian village, and again it was Pitkok living in Sam's cabin. Finally Sam came in and bought supplies, and Pitkok was with him. They stood there together, and discussed what they wanted, and it was light stuff, such as men would use on a long, hard trip. And they went away together, and—well, that's all there is to it. I wonder what that dance girl, Marie, thinks of it? "

She had ended her information in a feminine way, by a feminine speculation as to the member of her sex left behind.

In the usual meeting places, the trading post, the saloons, and the dance halls, men had smiled, and ventured that Sam had gone away on a foolish prospecting trip, such as had been made by a half dozen men in search of "Too-Much-Gold Creek," a mythical stream in the Mackenzie border told of by the natives, but never found.

Men worked more, gambled less, and played infrequently now that the busy season was on in force, and the fires from the pits shone dully on every gulch, every night. The ring of the ax, the creak of the windlass, and the clashing of overturned buckets, formed a threnody too irresistible to be displaced by idle wonder as



to the goings and comings of one man. Life was palpitating, and wriggling, as if the loss of any camp character were unworthy of note. It followed its course.

Kentucky Smith, swinging down the trail and whistling, as he passed from his claim above ours, Bevins sauntering over to our cabin in the evenings to tell us that the pay on Number Twelve looked better, Sinclair stopping on his way up to give us camp news, were the only breaks in the steady grind of work, fed by hope.

And it was Sinclair who, on the way up, one night in early January, paused to tell us that Sam Barstow was back. That was all, he had returned.

"And Pitkok?" asked Dan, who stood on the edge of the dump, looking down to the blackened path leading past it, on which our fellow prospector had halted.

"Pitkok's dead!" was the reply.

We gave exclamations of surprise.

"Sam says he got clawed up by a bear as they were coming out," Sinclair went on. "Sam got there too late. Pitkok cashed in his chips, in spite of all that Sam could do. And it's a small loss, according to my reckoning. That buck gave me the willies. He was

82 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

too much of here, there, and everywhere, to suit my taste."

He plodded off up the trail, and we laid our fires for the night, and I took my part with some haste. My partner noticed it, and growled as he stooped over and thrust short logs against the face of clay and gravel that was to be thawed out to expose its contents.

"I suppose," he half groaned, in an amused voice, "that I've got to make the trip with you again to-night. Let me see. Yes, this is the regular night. It looks to me as if I stand to lose any way it's fixed up. If you get the girl, I lose a real partner. If you lose her, you'll be worse than a bear with a sore head, and I'm out. But I'll go with you, just the same."

He grinned up at me, knowing that I was too embarrassed and annoyed to retort. But it was my night to visit the camp, and even his gibes could not deter me.

"I'm not even going up to say 'Howdy' this evening," Dan said, parting from me at the beginning of the row. "It's a long, cold walk up there for a feller that ain't been sent for. Mercury's all frozen, everywhere. Davis Pain Killer bottle busted this afternoon, and

I'm plum' anxious to dance some. I'll be here, somewhere. So long!"

He turned, and dodged into the Honolulu, from which issued hilarious sounds, and I hastened on up the trail. I was late, and Kentucky was ahead of me. This time he had brought a banjo with him, and was singing when I entered. He stopped long enough to grin a welcome, and then went on shouting a negro song in his inimitable drawling voice.

Bill Wilton appeared saner than I had seen him in some time, and was venting hoarse cackles of laughter. Now and then he would look bewildered, and appear intent on trying to remember something, perhaps some familiar strain that he had heard in the old past. Kentucky brought his hand across the strings with a heavy sweep, as he finished the doleful chant of "How the Possum Lost His Ta-a-ail," and tossed the banjo over on top of the skin-covered couch.

"Beat you in to-night, Tom," he grinned. "Had to come down to relieve my feelin's. I'm as happy as a coon, when he finds three dogs and a nigger under his home tree."

I surmised that his words covered some other feeling than elation.

"What is the matter now?" I asked.

He looked grave for an instant, and then said: "Nothing, except that our claim's a dead one, and we've decided to abandon it, and look for a lay."

I was genuinely sorry for Kentuck, because I liked him.

"Are you certain?" I asked.

"Yes. We've crosscut the gulch from rim to rim, and never had a pay pan. We've proved that we're too high for the feed of the pay streak, wherever it may be."

He sat there and frowned for a moment, and I knew of what he was thinking—the best part of a season wasted; the long hours of hard work in the savage cold; the hopelessness of trying to get a lease at that time of the year on any ground that was worth while, and the futility of striking out on a prospecting trip. He glanced up, and read the sympathy in my eyes.

"Thanks," he said soberly. "You're all right, Tom. Just keep me in mind, won't you? And if you hear of anything, let me know."

Bessie was full of suggestions, but they were not altogether practical. The most promising venture was merely a little better than prospecting—the possibility of logging farther up the river, and running the timbers down to the

camp when the spring floods were over to sell to arrivals. His ill fortune sobered our visit, and we started away earlier than usual, walking down the trail together, after bidding Bessie good-night.

"I've got to drop in along the line here to find Dan," I said. "Suppose you come with me, and we'll see if he knows of anything. He usually has a card or two up his sleeve."

We turned into the Honolulu, and found it strangely deserted.

"What's up?" Kentuck asked Hopkins, the proprietor, who was sitting gloomily by his stove.

"All right up to an hour ago," he said, as if we had referred to his business alone, "and then somebody came in and said that Sam Barstow was up at the Horn Spoon trying to break the bank, and everyone stampeded."

"Then that's where we must go," cheerfully responded Kentuck, leading the way toward the door.

We went into the Horn Spoon, and almost as we opened the storm door knew that something unusual was taking place. There was an air of suppressed excitement in its very atmosphere, an undercurrent of tensility. The wheel was not running as usual, and the back

end of the room appeared deserted. Around the middle table there was a crowd, the outer edges on tiptoe. There was scarcely a word being said, and the place was filled with that ominous silence which comes when big stakes are being played. Its very lamps, with their tin reflectors, seemed looking downward to one spot. We got to the edge of the crowd, and looked over others' shoulders.

At the table but one man was playing, and that was Sam Barstow, who sat with his hat down over his eyes. Marie Devinne was clicking the case buttons, and Spider Riggs, immaculate and immobile as usual, was dealing the cards, his long, slender fingers slipping back and forth as he drew them from the case, or reached over and raked in the chips. Evidently Barstow was playing recklessly, for his bets were large in blue chips, whose value I knew was five dollars each. He was shoving stacks of them over, and his customary coolness appeared to have deserted him, for at each successive loss he swore volubly. Dan was there, and our eyes met. He winked at me with gravity, and edged around to my side.

"That idiot is locoed," he muttered. "He's lost at least seven or eight thousand dollars already, and is about to dip into his last thou-

sand. Been playing on Cavanaugh's receipt for money in the A. C. safe. He acts half mad. Watch him."

Barstow was playing a combination of cards, and Riggs was asking him if his bets were all down.

"Yes," he said, "go ahead."

Slowly the cards came out. It seemed as if every "coppered card" won, and every one without the little tablet lost. His luck was reversed. He sat motionless and gloomy, as pile after pile of his chips were drawn in and slipped back into the chip rack with the sharp, timed clicking, as the slender, manicured finger of Spider Riggs snipped them into place. For an instant he sat there and swore softly, and Riggs waited.

"Well," he challenged, "got enough? Anybody else around here want to try his luck?"

He stared with insolent triumph at the faces girdling the table, and no one moved. Everyone was watching Sam Barstow, whose drawn brows and set lips told of his rising anger.

He suddenly thrust all his remaining chips across on the table.

"I'll make a stab to call the turn," he growled, and Riggs, after another deliberate pause, slipped the last cards from the box. He

laughed a little as he raked in the chips, and Marie Devinne lifted the sides of the case rack, and let the buttons go slipping back.

Barstow gave a last oath, and jumped to his feet so suddenly that his stool was overturned. He glared at Spider Riggs, as if undecided what to say, and then almost shouted: "You got me! If it hadn't been that Marie had the cases, I'd 'a' thought the game was crooked. I'm through with you. You're good and welcome. Let me out of this!"


He broke through the crowd, and elbowed his way toward the bar.

"How much of a stake have I got left?" he demanded, and the bartender, calmly looking up at him, called across the room to Spider Riggs: "What's the tally?"

"Seven thousand five hundred," Riggs called back, with a certain note of gloating satisfaction in his voice.

"Five hundred left," the bartender answered Barstow. "You don't seem to have much luck to-night. Have something?"

The miner stalked to the bar, and seized a bottle of *hutchnu*, the soul and body destroying liquor of Alaska, filled a glass to the brim, and drained it at a gulp. He put the glass down again, and refilled it, and Kentucky Smith at



my side nudged me, and whispered: "Travelin' a few, isn't he?"

The room was beginning to reek with sound again, and the wheel had started its rounds, while the man behind it shouted: "Try your luck here, gentlemen."

The lure of the clicking ball appeared to attract Sam Barstow, and he banged his heavy fist down on the bar, and whirled around.

"I've got five hundred left," he asserted belligerently, "and I'll take a chance on busting the wheel."

He shoved men aside as he made his way over to it, and stood.

"What's the limit here?" he demanded.

"The bank roll," was the calm response. "It's worth more than your five hundred."

"Give me the chips," Barstow growled, and did not trouble to seat himself, but stood erect at the end of the table.

Again the room was silenced, and men surged toward the gambler. Dan and I found ourselves jammed up against the side, where we could not for the moment extricate ourselves. Playing a hundred dollars at a wager, the angry victim of ill fortune threw his chips out, selecting the number fifteen as a favorite. It lost. Three times he tried it, and each time became

angrier as it failed to appear. With a sudden gesture of defiance, he shoved all his remaining chips on the red. Marie Devinne had crowded through to his shoulder, and tried to get him to change his wager.

"Don't be a chump," she insisted. "It's a fool's play."

But he turned toward her, and frowned.

"You let me alone," he said, and she shrugged her shoulders, and watched the ball start its course, as if fascinated.

There was a tense moment as it dropped downward from the rim, and began rattling and bouncing across the partitions. Slower and slower it ran, and then poised itself as the wheel slowed down, and appeared to be balanced. Barstow's fury was in suspense. He leaned forward on his knuckles at the end of the table, and fixed his staring, excited eyes on it, with a hard, glittering frown.

The ball wavered as the wheel went round, and then slowly, and as if maliciously, it fell from the partition with a soft click, and swam slowly around. The wheel man did not touch it, but stood with folded arms, appreciating the danger of appearing too eager to announce the result. It had fallen into the green of the "00," and the house had won.

It seemed to me, standing there by the side, and feeling a sort of sympathy for the fool, that everyone in the place had held his breath up to that moment, and now gave a sigh. But the silence held as we waited to hear what Barstow would say.

I had a vague impression that the bartender had climbed to the top of his bar, and was looking down over the crowd; that Spider Riggs was standing on a chair behind, and that Big Jim was grinning over the shoulders of Kentucky Smith. I had witnessed other and heavier gambling than this, but none where there seemed to be so much concentrated fury in the loser. It was as if Barstow had been restraining himself all the evening, and now that his last savings had been swept away, broke loose.

He suddenly thrust his elbows backward, rudely making room for himself, and jerked the tails of his blue shirt loose from under his mackinaw. He tore at the belt around his waist, and fumbled beneath, then there was the sound of a harsh sweep and his oath, intermingled.

“ Think you’ve got me, eh? Well, you ain’t. Turn her for that, and may the curse of the devil take you if it doesn’t win! ”

He swung something high in the air, and brought it smashing down on the table, with

a dull, heavy, crunching sound. It was a gold belt that he had carried over his hips, its pockets bulging with weight. The force of its heaviness and the blow broke it open, and I gave a gasp.

From its burst apertures rolled out, across the table, over the numbers of the cloth, and to the very floor itself, nuggets of gold. And they were red—glowing dully, red as the single nugget of ill omen I had seen in Cavanaugh's fingers, and held in my palm, unmistakably the red of the gold that had cost poor old Bill Wilton his reason, his happiness, and his wife.

There was a sharp gasp of indrawn breaths, as men, though unfamiliar with the legend, leaned forward and stared at that strange gold. They knew in a flash that Sam Barstow's mysterious trip had not been without results. I doubt if there were more than two men in the room, however, beside myself, who understood to the full what that red gold meant. It filled me with a strange horror, and, half faint and sick, I backed away from it, and crowded my way to the door, jerked it open, and stepped outside into the clean night air. One man followed on my heels, and I whirled to face him. It was Cavanaugh, and he met my eyes with a long, meaning stare.

“ Pitkok! ” he said hoarsely, in a strained voice. “ Pitkok went with him, and showed the way. Pitkok, poor devil, learned the secret of it from some of the sagas of his tribe, and took that man to it. And I think I know how Pitkok died! ”

I held myself rigid as I, too, surmised the tragedy, the murder, when the red lust had cankered the mind of Sam Barstow, honest up to that fateful hour.

Cavanaugh knew that I understood. He suddenly turned, and hurried away down the white trail, with his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, and his head bent low, as if grieving over this exposure of a fellow being's cruel cupidity, and I looked up at the door, which opened, to release my partner into the arms of the night.

CHAPTER VII

BARSTOW'S END

DAN and I did not see the end of that night of gaming, for we were depressed and hurried back to the gulch, running now and then between the long slopes, and up that stretch of trail which lay along the white surface of the river. But we heard of the outcome two nights later, when Kentucky came down to our cabin to learn if we had any news for him.

"I reckon you-all heard what happened after you left the Horn Spoon the other night?"

"No," we chorused, looking at him.

"Well, that Sam Barstow sure had the devil's own luck from the minute he banged that queer-lookin' gold of his on the wheel. He broke the wheel in one turn, and Billy Abramsky pulled the cloth over it. Then he howled like a timber wolf with joy, and went back to the layout. He grabbed up that belt he had around him, put the gold back in it, buckled it under his shirt, and started in to play with what he'd got from the wheel. In just two

hours he'd won his eight thousand back, and at seven in the mornin' he walked out of the Horn Spoon with eighteen thousand dollars of its money, and a bill of sale for the place."

It was astonishing news, and our exclamations betrayed our surprise.

"Yes, sir, the Horn Spoon's got a new proprietor now. It's Sam Barstow, and he's runnin' the place. The boys that owned it are workin' for him. He hasn't got time. Too busy payin' his fond respects to Marie Devinne. I reckon, too, that he'll get her. He looks pretty good to her, with all the wad of dust he has, and with that red stuff that makes folks believe there might be plenty more where that came from. I reckon Sam Barstow's due to make a home stake."

Kentucky was sitting with his elbows on his knees, and his moccasin heels up on the rungs of his stool, and his eyes looked thoughtfully at the little round hole in the end of the Yukon stove, that seemed to be watching him. I fancied I read a trace of homesickness in his boyish eyes, and a despondency that I had never before seen in them.

The country and its round of misfortune appeared to be telling on him. I was sorry that all our efforts had failed to develop any

chance for him that was worth taking. All the ground worth leasing had been let out long before that time, and there were but few claims working where men were hired for day's wages. We tried to talk cheerfully to him, but he must have felt that we had nothing to offer, and that our encouragement was hollow, when he left us that night to tramp back up to his cabin at the head of the gulch.

It stands out, quite clear to me in the light of after events, the peculiar amazement I felt on the following morning. Yet in the telling it seems nothing.

I had got up early, it being my week to build the fire and cook the breakfast, a simple, primitive task; for our larder was scant as measured by civilized standards. It was still dark, and the candles, stuck in homemade brackets in the corner by the stove, writhed and twisted as the heat waves eddied upward, and the room was choked with the fumes of bacon frying, and desiccated eggs simmering on the back of the stove, and the blubbering of the oatmeal pot.

Dan threw his legs out of the bunk, gasping, and called sleepily: "Hey, Tom! Your bacon's going too hot. Give us a breath of air, can't you?"

I choked, and laughed, and went to the door and threw it open. Coming up the trail, far down the hillside, was a sled drawn by straining malemutes, who looked like the wolves of death in that pallid hour. I stood with the frying pan in hand, looking at them when they stopped, and their driver turned up the trail leading to our cabin, leaving his team behind. He advanced until he was close to me.

"Tchami!" I called the trader's greeting, and then, still in the tongue: "What do you want?"

He answered in English:

"Want moose meat?"

"Moose meat? Sure!"

It was like the voice of an angel, the proffer of anyone offering fresh meat to men who had lived on tinned stuff and bacon for so many months. Dan came hurrying to the door with the strings of his moccasins dangling and trailing behind him, and his hair still ruffled.

"How much you take? Heap good meat, huh?" he called.

The visitor stood quietly for an instant, and then approached until he stood in front of us. I saw that he was not of any tribe with which I was familiar. There was less of the Oriental squattiness of face, less of the Oriental squatti-

ness of figure. He was lithe and straight, and his nose was the high, fine, warrior nose of the red-Indian tribes—the nose of the hereditary fighter and hunter. His eyes were frowning, with a certain defiant dignity.

“ You needn’t trouble to talk pidgin English to me,” he said, with perfectly correct pronunciation. “ I can speak the language as well as you can. I am a Sioux! No dog-trotting, fish-eating mongrel of an Eskimo. I have moose meat to sell. It will cost you a dollar a pound.”

There was an instant’s silence, and then I tried to soften his indignation with a question.

“ A Sioux? And away up here? Why? ”


“ To hunt. To make a living.”

His voice sounded as if he were slightly mollified.

“ Where did you go to school? ” I asked, still feeling that strange curiosity.

“ Carlisle. But do you want fresh meat? ”

He had repulsed our overtures again, and was all Sioux, ugly and aloof; so we bought from him what meat we could use, and saw him start up the creek on his journey without regret. We talked of him after he had gone, and I think in a measure I sympathized with him, the descendant of a race of warriors and hunt-



ers, who had refused to live anywhere except in the condition of his heredity.

“ It was easy to tell he'd been somewhere with white men,” Dan commented. “ Did you notice his tooth? ”

“ No,” I said, interested.

“ Why, one of his front teeth had been broken off, and fixed with silver. Shows he knew what dentists were for, but thought silver good enough for a Sioux! ”

I did remember something about his crooked lips when he spoke, but had not been as observing as my partner.

Kentucky and I talked of the Sioux when we visited the camp and Bessie Wilton, together, on the following night. She scoffed at any sentiment.

“ I saw him,” she said. “ He came into the post to buy some stuff. I don't see him as you do. He is treacherous, and a savage still, more savage than any Alaskan native, in spite of his Carlisle education. There is cruelty in him, and it peers from his eyes. Ugh! He makes me shiver! He stands so immovable! He stares at one so steadily, and with a sort of contempt. And that isn't all! ”

She threw her hands upward, and shook her head.

"Didn't try to bite you, did he?" Kentuck drawled, in a teasing voice.

She ignored him, and spoke to me.

"He wanted the best string of beads in the post. It was part of a rosary, and there was a cross on it. He bought it, and then, what do you think he did? Wrenched the cross loose, and ground it under his heel! And he sneered at me when I expostulated."

"Sneered? Sneered at you? Why, the first time I meet him I'll twist his dirty neck!" Kentucky burst forth in indignant, boyish wrath. "The scrubby scoundrel! To show his blasphemous impertinence before a white girl. I'll teach him!"

I cannot but admit that I shared his anger, although I said nothing, when I thought of the Sioux's insolence. Yet I knew that perhaps there had been no intention to affront one whom he saw as a mere person behind a counter in a frontier post.

"The natives call him the Hatchet," she went on, without noticing Kentucky's outburst. "I believe they are all a little afraid of him; but he is smart. They say he can speak their language. Oh, but say! Have you heard of the camp courtship? Sam Barstow has infatuated your friend Marie."

said. "It ain't exactly me alone. I've got two sisters. I never had a chance, and I wanted them to get the best there was. They're in a sort of young ladies' school back East, and—well, I've paid their expenses, and now they'll have to try to go to work. You know what that means for girls who don't know how!"

I nodded my head, and felt how much it meant to him.

"And that ain't all," he added, speaking in a lower tone. "I had one brother only, and he was white, clean through. And he helped me, always, when I was busted, so long as he lived. It wasn't so much, you understand, but when he died, and left no money, because he'd always helped me along, I swore I'd keep his wife and three kids from ever starvin'. And I've done it, up to now; but here we are on a claim that ain't made an ounce of dust, and the bank's gone under! The Ocean Bank, that everybody said was all right, and which was supposed to send money out of my eleven thousand every month to—well—to care for them other things!"

The magnitude of his loss overshadowed me, and I felt the far-reaching effects of that distant failure which might change the current of so many lives. My admiration for this silent,

self-sacrificing man blazed fervidly, as I thought of all that he had borne, but never mentioned, in the two years of our companionship.

It seemed to me, standing there by his side in the dimness of the trading post, that all the world, that world outside, depended on money—on the gold that we dug from the earth. His very helplessness, his inability to even send them a word of encouragement, the months of anxiety he must endure until he could know how they had fared, and what had become of them, were appalling. He loomed large and noble in my estimation as he stood there in the corner, perturbed and gripping himself, and I would have sacrificed much to have relieved him.

“ Nothing but good news, I hope? ”

Cavanaugh’s voice claimed our attention.

“ Oh, so-so! ”

Dan was still trying to bear a brave front and conceal his wounds.

“ Yes,” I said, answering for myself, “ I have no complaint.”

The genial trader passed on, and I saw that he stepped wide to pass the saturnine Sioux; for the Hatchet was there, sneering at the emotions of the white men around him. His eyes met mine, and he conveyed to me a flash of dis-

like. We had met but once, and then had engaged in neither dispute nor conflict; but I saw that in his look which was malicious. Some grim prescience told me that we were not through with each other, and that his fate line ran with mine.

A group of men near us were discussing Sam Barstow's death, and in the other end of the room a man was reading a newspaper, months old, aloud, for the benefit of his hearers. Windy Jim was still serving out his letters, and weighing the gold dust from the buckskin bags thrown across to his hands.

Someone opened the door, and through it I saw that the day had given place to the blackness of night, so quickly had time slipped by. A man came up and began to talk in low tones to my partner, as if intrusting him with a confidence, and I felt that I was an intruder.

"Pardon me," I interrupted. And then, to Dan: "I'll find you when I am ready to go home. I'm going up on the hill for a few minutes."


He nodded at me, and said I should find him there, and again turned a sympathetic ear toward the other man, his own worries suppressed under the mask of his face. I threaded my way toward the door, and pulled my parka

hood up over my ears, and my mittens on my hands, and prepared to face that outer, death-like chill; but my heart was warm as I thought of Bessie Wilton up there in the cabin on the hill, the girl whom I loved, and who I had reason to believe returned my affection.

The stillness of a world frozen brooded over the camp as I turned away from its turbulent front to the well-known path in the snow, that would take me to her door. My heart leaped with exultation as each step carried me nearer, and I dismissed from my mind, as much as I could, all other things but a memory of her face. A malemute barked at me as I walked in front of one cabin, and I called to him, and held out my hand. Once the trail was lost in the dimness, and I stepped off, hip deep, into the yielding snow, and laughed aloud at my own hasty clumsiness.

I came around by the path leading to the rear, knowing that at that hour her father might be asleep in the front room. The light shone boldly through a window which I passed in going toward the door, and the blind was not drawn. I glanced in, and then came to an abrupt and withering halt.

Kentuck was standing there looking at her, and in his hand was a letter. She was standing



before him with clasped hands upraised, and a look on her face such as I had never seen before. The light was so clear and full from the hanging lamp above, that I could catch even the stray glints in her hair, the soft sparkle of her eyes, her half-parted lips. Their very attitude made me pause, tense, and leaning forward, on the worn trail. It seemed fraught with significance, the entire picture, he standing there so clean cut, and handsome, and youthful, and she, so radiant and beautiful.

Suddenly, with lips that expressed a cry of happiness, although the sound did not reach me, she stepped across to him, and threw her arms about his neck, and pillowed her face contentedly against his breast. His arms enfolded her, the letter falling in fluttering, erratic circles to the floor. He bent his head over and kissed her on the waving hair, and his lips moved as his arms went around her. She looked up at him and spoke, with a face that betrayed her happiness.

My knees were weakening as I stood there on the cold snow outside; and it was no colder than my heart, which had turned to ice and frozen in my bosom. I clutched the clothing over it with my hand, and gasped. The stars above had sharpened to leering, penetrating

122 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

lights of mockery. The very trees of the forest behind seemed bending forward to jeer at my distress. Life itself was an illusion, bitter and cynical!

I turned and staggered away down the trail, and that I now stepped repeatedly from it and into the chilling drifts gave me no thought, for I was miserable, and hope and ambition seemed to have been killed in one swift, unmistakable discovery. Elizabeth Wilton would never be more to me than a friend, and the youth and brilliancy of Kentuck had won. I was but an old, old man, without the grace of speech or accomplishment, and with nothing to offer to the one for whom I would have gladly surrendered life itself!

CHAPTER IX

THE GOLDEN MOCCASINS

I BELIEVE that uncommunicative men suffer more than others. I sometimes felt, in the week following the discovery that Elizabeth Wilton and Kentucky loved each other, that if I could only find words to tell Dan, I should feel better; for I knew he surmised that something had gone amiss, by the fact that he ceased mentioning trips to the camp, or Bessie. And at times I felt my own selfishness for not extending to him and his troubles more thought.


My pride made me pull myself together enough to make one more visit to her home, and explain that we were working so hard I could not find time to come as frequently as I had, and I could not tell from the expression of her eyes whether she was pleased or not. I conjectured that she would be happier through my absence, and, as for myself, knew that I should be, for to look at her stabbed me with hopeless longing.

To my own credit I affirm that I sustained

no bitterness toward my successful rival, and was but glad that, if I could not win her love, he was the fortunate one. But it was more difficult to hide my wound from him than anyone else. He had secured a week's work windlassing on a claim but three above ours, and whenever he went to the camp unfailingly stopped and asked me to go with him, and was unfailingly refused on the pretext of hard work. It was just eight days since I had been there when he insisted so vigorously that I was hard put to find a pretext for not going.

"You've just got to go with me to-night," he said, "because if you don't Bess will think you're sore over somethin'. You really ain't, are you?"

I saw that the preservation of my secret demanded the trip, and I went. It was an evening of agony. From her very attitude I felt that she was outdoing herself to be pleasant and agreeable to me, and to conceal what I knew of her relations with Kentucky, which were not mentioned. I appreciated that delicacy, for it is sometimes policy to permit wounds to heal, and I thought they must have surmised that I had some inkling of conditions. It was one of the most bitter evenings I ever passed, and



I was glad when we turned down the hill toward the camp.

The Horn Spoon was running as noisily as if its owner had not killed himself, after condemning to slow death two of those who had been its employees. But to me it offered nothing to relieve the gloom of my mind.

"Hello, boys!" Windy Jim greeted us, as we stood near the door.

He came toward us, and then stepped to a row of pegs at the end of the bar, and took down an elaborately thrummed and beaded squirrel parka, and stood doubling the big "sunrise" hood so that it would muffle his neck.

"Haven't seen you since the mail came in, Tommy," he said to me, talking as he prepared to go outside.

"No. Working," I replied.

"And where in the name of old Solomon and his glory are you going with all that fancy rig?" drawled Kentucky. "What's up? Celebration of some sort? It ain't the Fourth of July, is it?"

Jim laughed, and stood facing us as he pulled on his mittens.

"No," he said. "Just goin' to see some fun. Big squaw dance over across the river to-

night. Some kin-folks of old Singer has come down from up above. Say, come on, go over. It'd please the old man a whole lot, and you'll see the real swell Taninaw society there a-shakin' its light fantastic feet. Come on over! You got time. We'll come back and sleep in my cabin. It's too dark to mush out to the gulch to-night."

I was eager for some change—anything to get away from myself. I hesitated, and Kentucky added his insistence, with a boyish fervor.

"Let's go, old Sobersides," he said. "Dan knows you are liable to stay in camp if the notion takes you. He won't worry."

And in an impulsive mood for anything out of the ordinary, I consented.

Singer was a squaw man, who believed in corporal punishment for his better half, but was usually unable to carry it through. He had been a whaler, and in his youth was probably a hardy customer in a rough-and-tumble fight; but his youth had gone, and nothing save his valor and conviction that a man should be master of his own house remained. The lady of his devotion, Black Ellen, weighed about two hundred pounds, while he was a dried-up little wisp of a man, and when he began to exercise his prerogative of punishing her, she usually bore

it patiently for about so long, then "turned loose," and hammered him into a state of submission.

They told the story that after one of these family affairs, when passing prospectors, attracted by the din, came to his rescue, and revived him to consciousness by dumping a pail of water over his "bloody but unbowed head," he sat weakly up, blinked his swollen eyes, and then said to Ellen: "I guess you'll be good now, won't you? If you don't I'll have to beat you up again!" And Ellen unscarred, and not even breathing hurriedly, meekly said she would.

The lights of his cabin, the most pretentious on that bank, glowed vividly as a beacon when we followed the worn trail across the river. Long before we reached that side we heard the brazen note of a cornet played by a man who had once been a trumpeter in the regular army, but had forgotten even that accomplishment. The steady, finishing notes of "Ta—da—da—a-a!" prolonged and descending, told that he was doing his best to put an artistic finish to each measure, and that a waltz was in progress.

The smoke of the stovepipe was curling straight upward, a distinguishable gray, and

told us that Singer's big cabin was superheated for the event. The dogs outside were squatted at a distance from the cabin, and howling a melancholy and disturbed accompaniment to the music from within. Boisterous shouts, rendered faint by the log walls, exuded outward, and the major population of the village seemed to be in attendance.

"Sounds as if they were raisin' Cain, don't it?" Windy Jim said, as we came to the door. "Singer's ball is certainly doin' itself some proud."

He opened the door without knocking, and we stepped inside. The noise was coming almost entirely from the white men who were participating, and the natives sat stolidly on the floor at the foot of the wall around the room. Some of them grinned laboriously in an effort to adopt the white man's expression of enjoyment, and Singer himself was just calling "partners for a square dance."

Kerosene lamps borrowed from every available source rendered the room fairly light. They exposed the bark-covered roof poles above, the heavy ridge log, the logs at the sides, and the peeled saplings that formed the partition for a back room. They showed the curling whorls of smoke, the pictures cut from

old Sunday newspapers and pasted decoratively on the wall, and a lurid picture of the Virgin and Child brought from some mission. White men and bucks began to make the circle of the squaws and maidens squatted on the floor in their ludicrous finery, fashioned after the few white women's costumes they had seen, and soon there were eight couples waiting for the music to begin.

"By golly! I didn't see you come in!" Singer exclaimed, discovering us, and hurried over to shake our hands. "Pretty nice of you to come, Tom. Never saw you go to no dance before. Ellen! Oh, Ellen! Why don't you git up, and come and shake hands with your guests?"

Ellen waddled over to us obediently, and shook hands in a limp way that belied her strength. She interrupted herself to seize a dog that had nosed the door open, and entered. She caught him by the scruff of the neck with those same limp fingers, and he let out an expostulatory howl of agony as she dragged him to the door, and administered a kick with her moccasined toe that sent him flying out into the snow.

"You talk to Ellen," Singer said. "I'm callin'," and signaled to the so-called orchestra,

which sawed into the strains of "Buffalo Gals, Ain't Ye Comin' Out To-night."

The feet beat rhythmically on the rough slab floor, and the white men lugubriously executed jig steps on the corners when called upon to "Balance all," and lifted the screaming squaws from the floor, and whirled them bodily when admonished to "swing your pardners." The bucks danced sedately, as usual, and appeared to accept the amusement as extremely hard work, and a white man's innovation.

Over in one corner an old man threatened to disrupt the orchestra with an alarm clock evidently a recent acquisition, which he kept winding, to set off the bell. No sooner would its clangor die away than he would gravely start it going again, as if he regarded himself a most valuable adjunct to the music. And I am not sure but he was, for no caterwauling of sound could have been worse than that which emanated from the band.

"See those two fellers dancin'?" Jim asked, catching my arm, and holding his head closer that he might speak in my ear direct.

He pointed at two white men who were in one of the sets, and I have looked upon few harder faces. I had never seen them before,

although I thought I knew every white man in the district.

“ Yes. What about them? ”

“ That’s Royce and Sparhawk. Ever hear of ’em before? ”

The names meant nothing to me, and I said so.

“ Well, they’re two of the men tried for dynamitin’ in the Cœur d’Alene riots. They got off because there wasn’t evidence against ’em; but everybody knows they was guilty. Bad medicine, both of ’em! Rob anything from a stage to a sluice box, and a man’s life wouldn’t stand between them and a dollar.”

The music had stopped between two numbers, and Jim waited patiently for it to renew itself, as if fearing that his comments might be overheard. The instant it began he again mumbled rapidly in my ear.

“ There’s been a killin’ or two on the trail out of Dawson, and while I don’t say these fellers did it, they found it mighty convenient to get out and cross the line, where there ain’t no Mounted Police. I passed their camp on the way down, and you can bet I didn’t let ’em know I was carryin’ mail. I’m afraid of ’em. They’re up to somethin’, you can bet! ”

132 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

I watched them more closely after that, and was impressed by two things—their swaggering bravado, and their shifting eyes. They were big men, with the shoulders of those who have worked much underground, stooped, and strongly muscled about the deltoids, and their movements were heavy and sure. One of them stopped after the set was over, made his way outside, and returned with a jug of *hutchnu*, which he passed around, boisterously insistent that everyone should have a drink with him.

To avoid offense, Kentuck, Jim, and I each lifted the jug to his lips. I turned to see who would follow us in this participation of hospitality, and saw behind me the Hatchet. I had not observed him before. He did not unfold his arms, and shook his head, scowling from his fierce black eyes at Royce, who had proffered it.

“You’re the first Injun I ever saw that wouldn’t drink when it didn’t cost him nothin’,” the Cœur d’Alener snarled, as if looking for trouble. “You ain’t too cussed good to drink with a white man, air you?”

“No; but that doesn’t imply that I’d drink with you,” was the fearless answer.

It took a long time for the significance of

She looked at Kentucky mischievously.

"They are to be married. They say he is loading her with presents, and he has bought that cabin that Sturgis and Buckingham built, the one back toward the gulch, and has four or five men making it suitable for the residence of the charming Marie. This camp is not without society, you know."

She ended with a drawling laugh, and Kentucky took advantage of the pause to say that he wished he could have got the job of carpentering for the cabin. We did not laugh at that, for I think we both surmised that Kentucky's financial outlook was worrying him more than he cared to mention.

"And the wedding," Bessie went on hurriedly, as if to arouse Kentucky from his brooding, and rally him to better spirits, "takes place day after to-morrow—that is, the night after to-morrow night. Had you heard that yet?"

The Kentuckian came gallantly to a recovery.

"No, we hadn't heard that," he asserted. "Now, what other news is there hereabouts, Miss Walkin' Newspaper?"

She laughed, seeing that he was in a better mood, and for an hour subtly encouraged him,

102 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

told of camp rumors, and of native gossip, until we went away.

And we, with everyone else on the gulch, attended the wedding of Sam Barstow and Marie Devinne. The Horn Spoon was its setting. The paraphernalia of chance had been removed, and the floor cleaned and waxed to a glistening white, and no man might buy anything at the bar. A United States commissioner, from Taninaw, performed the ceremony and it was somewhat oratorical, inasmuch as the gentleman was from Texas, and loved flowers of speech. There was a good deal of the "grand old flag" business, and a lot of talk about the hardy pioneer, and the wealth of the nation being in its offspring, and Sam Barstow caught his bride in his big arms, held her up, and kissed her, threw a bag of dust in the commissioner's hands, and invited everybody to "have somethin'."

It was while standing in front of the pine bar that he made his wedding present. He winked at the bartender, and called in a loud voice: "Give me that package for Mrs. Barstow, will you?"

The bartender handed him a bundle, and from it Sam took out something that made us stare—that is, it made Cavanaugh and me in-

terchange glances. It was a pair of moccasins, absurd and heavy. They were literally covered with gold, and it required no second glance to see that the gold was red! He had taken the gold he had gathered from that Northern trip, and selected and hammered nuggets enough to present his bride with a pair of gold moccasins.

Pierced, and laid thickly over the buckskin, they were cumbersome, and showy, and red. He insisted on putting them on her feet, and she shambled less lightly in the dance as she carried their weight. But one round of the room she made when the wretched attempt at an orchestra began, and then, panting, she exchanged them for her others, and relinquished them to the care of the bartender.

A native from across the river, who had timidly entered the door, looked at them with wide eyes, and abruptly turned and vanished into the night. A prospector from the Hootalinqua peered at them, started to test their weight in his hand, and then drew back. The music went on, and above it all rose the boisterous shouts of Sam Barstow, urging his guests to "Hit her up! Step lively!"

"Them's some moccasins," the bartender


104 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

remarked, as he threw them back on the bar. "They weigh an even forty ounces, and that spells about seven hundred and fifty dollars, the way gold's runnin' now. Some golden shoes, eh?"

The men standing in front of his bar assured him vociferously that they were. Only Cavanaugh and I, standing there at the end, and not participating, failed to wonder whence came the gold.

"Come on. Let's go home," a voice sounded behind me, and I turned to see my partner, who was apparently satisfied with the night's entertainment, and, with a curt good-night to the trader, I went.

I did not see the moccasins of gold again for some time. At least a month went by, in which my partner and I continued to work, with always alluring and never satisfying prospects. And in that time the news of the camp down on the river, with its small happenings, drifted upward to our gulch with more or less veracious details. Now it was that the Hatchet had been away on another hunting trip, and returned without meat, the game having run toward the east; now that someone had struck pay on Hoosier Creek; and again that Sam Barstow had gone down to the mouth of the



Taninaw—two days' hard travel—to buy some extra furnishings and supplies from a steamer that had laid up there for the winter.

It was in the early days of February when the most exciting news broke, and, as fate would so have it, it was on another night when I was in the camp. For three days no one had seen Marie Barstow, and—coincidentally, the camp believed—no one had seen Spider Riggs. In that time Sam Barstow had wandered backward and forward in the Horn Spoon, glowering at anyone who spoke to him, and sometimes muttering to himself.

It was the talk of the camp on the night when I went down alone. I was in no mood for the divided companionship of Bessie, and Kentuck was there in her cabin, gay and musical as ever. After a short visit, I excused myself on the ground of my partner's anxiety to return quickly, and went down the hill with a certain bitterness in my heart. It was not late in the evening, but the night was gloomy and lighted by the stars alone.

I looked in at the Horn Spoon and the Honolulu. In neither place did I see Sam Barstow. I turned for the long, lonely walk over the trail leading to the mines, for I had misled—plainly lied to—Bessie Wilton and Kentucky,

when I intimated that I had been accompanied by my partner.

I stopped for an instant where the trail entered the low-lying and scraggly pines and firs shutting off the view of the camp. From that site it was black, a gathering of low-built log cabins, with windows fronting the white expanse of the river only. I was almost beyond the sound of its night voice. Nearest to me was the pretentious structure which Sam Barstow called home.

I stood musing over the disappearance of Marie, and wondering if she were there, when suddenly, as if from all sides of it, belched sound and flame. The spot was a lurid mass of light. I surmised that it had been blown up, and ran toward it. Men were running from other directions, also, and the night had become a pandemonium.

We began hurrying toward the cabin, to save its contents, when a voice bellowed commandingly, from the outer darkness, rendered more dense by the flames: "Let it alone! It's mine. I want it to burn!"

We who were there, and others running toward us, turned in the direction of the voice, arrested by its savage order. Into the edge of the light stalked Sam Barstow, and in his hand

was a gun. The light played dully on its blue barrel and his knuckles, for he gripped it tightly.

"I blew it up!" he said, so loudly that his voice could be heard above the crackling of the flames that were gaining headway, and the sound of moccasins crunching over the frozen snow as other men arrived, panting, and formed a circle around him. "It was mine. I'm through with it."

He stood and cursed for a moment, and I stared closer at him, wondering if he had been drinking to excess; but the light that was in his smouldering eyes was not that of drunkenness.

"I built that cabin for her," he said, still speaking in loud vigor. "You know who I mean. I did other things for her, and after that I wasn't an honest man. I went after it, and got it—the red gold. I even gave that to her. You saw the moccasins! And what did I get in the end? When I came back from Tani-naw, I trailed till late in the morning to be with her. She was there, all right! And that sneaking-faced Spider Riggs was with her! With my wife! Do you know what I did with them?"

He shook his hands in the air, one fist

108 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

clenched, and the other still holding the gun.

“ I drove 'em before me on the trail for a full twenty-four hours, without blankets or tent to shelter 'em, and grub enough for only a day's rations. Then I told 'em if they ever came back, or I ever saw 'em again, I'd kill 'em like the Judases they were. And they're gone! I knew they wouldn't come back. I knew they'd die together out there in the cold, and that it beat killin' 'em then and there. She could go out with those cursed moccasins in her hands. They were all I gave her. And I'm through with it all. Get out of my way! ”

He had swung with his last words on the men nearest him, and they opened out to give him passage. He walked with steady steps toward the river bank, and plunged down it, and out upon the white expanse. He did not pause or look back, and we thought he was heading for the native village on the opposite bank. His steps led him toward the one dark spot on the river's face, where the camp water hole was kept open throughout the winter season. Against the snow and under the brightening stars, he was plainly visible as he halted by it, and then his voice came to us across the stillness:

“ Good-by! I'll save you a burial.”

His arm seemed waving toward us, and then there was a short, quick flash of yellow, and his figure appeared to crumple forward and plunge into the dark spot.

“ Shot himself! ” several men exclaimed, as we ran down the bank, and out toward the water hole. There was nothing there but the black water rushing fiercely and smoothly toward the ice-bound Ramparts. The thin coating of ice that had formed since the last bucket had been dipped into it in the evening had given way beneath the falling weight, and Barstow's last words had proved true. He had saved us the trouble of burying him.

CHAPTER VIII

KENTUCKY WINS

THE water ran so black and cold! It was grewsome to remember that but a minute before a man, a strong man, in the flush of life, had stood there, and then deliberately chosen it as his resting place! The stars shone as they had in that minute before, and the river's surface was as white, and off on the bank the lights of the cabins glowed, and the fire of the cabin that he had fitted for his bride burned higher and higher, as if it was a funeral pyre.

"He's gone, all right!" someone said, and we turned back toward the camp.

I tramped homeward after the moon had come up, thinking of the whole sordid tragedy. It did seem as if coincidence, or something else, had been at work. I could not share the superstition of the red gold. It was beyond reason that it should have played any malevolent part in this melodrama of the wilderness. And yet there it was!

Everyone, so far as I knew, who had ever had

anything to do with it had paid a price. Bill Wilton his reason, Pitkok his life, Sam Barstow, first his honesty and then his life; and the lure of it had led Marie Devinne, the silly little dance-hall girl, to marry him. Perhaps the moccasins had led Spider Riggs to her side, and her undoing. And Sam Barstow had driven them out to a lingering death, with the moccasins in their hands, then brooded over it, and been his own executioner.

I laughed at myself scornfully, for fancying that the gold was the cause of it all as I went wearily up the trail, to be met by the dogs, to stumble into our cabin, and awaken Dan to tell him of the tragedy. I was ashamed of myself when I put the question to him, as he sat there in his bunk smoking and listening:

“Do you suppose there is anything in that story of the gold being cursed?”

“Cursed, nothing!” he rumbled. “I only wish I had some of it, and knew where it was. I’d take the curse off it. That’s a squaw’s yarn, and nothin’ more.”

I pulled off my damp moccasins, and opened the ventilator in the roof. I was sick of the whole sordid sorrow, and of the camp itself. I was also jealous and discouraged, because Kentucky Smith, buoyant and lovable, appeared to

have the lead in the good graces of the only girl I had ever loved. Yes, I admitted it! She was all there was in life to me, and I hungered for her, and wanted her more than I wanted anything, even life itself.

My last words, as I crawled into my bed, and pulled the fur robe up around my ears, were: "I shan't go to that camp again for a week."

I fancied that I heard a soft chuckle from the bunk above mine.

"Well, I mean it!" I asserted angrily. But I was mistaken in my forecast, although not in my resolution.

It was the very next afternoon that I heard a cheerful voice from the trail that wound past our ever-growing and ever-poor dump. It was that of Kentucky.

"Hey, Tom," he shouted, "the mail's in. Windy Jim brought it down from Dawson. Come, go down with me?"

In that glorious excitement I forgot that I had said I should not return to Neucloviat for a whole seven days. The arrival of the first mail in six months was too much of a temptation. It meant letters from home, news from the vast outside world from which we were shut off by thousands of miles of forest and

mountain, of ice-clad rivers and snow-bound plains.

Dan came up the windlass rope hand over hand, and shouted: "What's that? Did I hear the word 'Mail'?"

"You did," was Kentucky's answer. "Some of the boys told me it came in this morning."

"Then here goes," Dan jubilated. "Up to the cabin for ours, to get on some dry moccasins and a fresh parka. Come on up, Kentuck, and we'll all go down together."

Before he had finished speaking, he was running up the path leading to the cabin on the shoulder of the hill, and we followed after. No one can appreciate the eagerness with which mail is greeted unless he has lived as we lived in those far-off days. The earth now has but few places where one could find such isolation. No one who has not so lived can understand that Presidential campaigns might be fought and new Presidents elected, installed, and in power, without the citizens knowing the existence of that personality; that kings or queens might die and their successors step in to become public among the world's figureheads, without intelligent men being aware of their elevation; that earthquakes might destroy

cities, and wars be waged and fought to the bitter end without patriots hearing, even vicariously, the thunder of the guns.

So we hurried away over the trail, whose shadows were rapidly deepening into the afternoon darkness of that time of the year, and entered the camp. We passed the still-smoldering ruins of what had been Sam Barstow's home, with no more than a swift, grieved thought, and hurried onward to the trading post, forgetful of the man who would no longer look for the mails. A crowd was there. It seemed as if every man in the hills had heard the news as it passed from mouth to mouth, and had gathered into the smoky shadows of the post.

"More dust for you, Jim," shouted someone, as we opened the door, and the little man of the trails looked up at us over his frost-blistered cheeks, and grinned.

"About seven dollars' worth from you, Mister Kentucky Smith," he said, shuffling over the letters from the box in front of him. "A dollar apiece is what I have to tax you for 'em. It's a mighty long trail, and the weather's none too summerish."

Kentucky looked troubled, and I saw that he



was embarrassed. I surmised that he had not that much money left in the world.

"Give me Dan's and mine, with his," I said, shoving myself forward, "and tell us how much they all come to, and I'll trip you my poke. It saves so much weighing."

Jim yelled a welcome to me, shook my hand, and as he began to gather the other letters together, said: "Good! That goes. Four for you, I think."

Kentuck smiled his gratitude at me, and I was glad that I had saved him the humiliation, for my experience has taught me that Kentuckians, even the most humble, have a rare sensitiveness, the sensitiveness of gentlemen.

We took our letters into the far corners to read them. Some of them were too sacred to be read in the midst of other men. Some of those in the room watched us curiously, for the day had witnessed emotions. It had seen men break down and cry, men who would not have cried if condemned to death within the coming hour. It had seen other men almost hysterical with happiness, and others who hurried away to their own cabins to ponder over the outcome of affairs left behind. It had seen men saved from financial wreck by the exten-

sion of a friendly draft; and so many watched another.

I had a letter from my mother, closing with its " God bless you, my boy," and one from a brother who besought me to abandon the quest, and come back to the soft life of the beaten tracks.

" Cleaned out! " I heard my partner's voice behind me. " Busted like an egg. Got nothin' left except what's here! All I've ever saved and sent out has been wiped up by the Ocean Bank, of San Francisco, where I salted it away."

My own happiness at the news that in my personal affairs all was well was blurred by his words, for he was my partner, and good, and loyal, and true. I turned to sympathize with him. I had never heard him speak of his other life, left behind, out in the States, even in his most confidential moods; but I saw that he was hard hit for some reason I could not fully understand.

" Cheer up, old man," I said, laying a hand on his shoulder. " We'll make more, some time."

He looked at me for a long time, and his eyes were those of a sufferer.

" You see, you don't understand it all," he

that answer to penetrate the befuddled brain of Royce, or else he was surprised at hearing such perfect English from an Indian. He suddenly flared up, and, holding the jug forward with one hand, put the other behind him.

"You'll drink with *me*, and do it *now!*" he roared.

What the outcome might have been cannot be told, for the Sioux stood there without wavering, his arms still folded across his great chest, and his eyes unflinching and baleful; but the only man in the room who would perhaps have dared to thus interfere, Sparhawk, jumped behind his partner, caught the hand behind, and gave so sharp a jerk that Royce was whirled squarely around. A heavy gun rattled to the floor, and Sparhawk calmly picked it up and slipped it into his own shirt.

"You fool!" he growled, in a hoarse monotone. "What ails you? Take a fall to yourself. No trouble of any kind here! See? Go on, and shut your trap!"

As if brought to his senses by something suggestive in the speech, Royce lowered his hands, and started to the next guest.

"It's a good thing for you I didn't put it over," he said, over his shoulder, with a wolfish grin at the Hatchet.

"Perhaps," the latter sneered, exposing the silver tooth. And there was that in his tone that made me believe it was far better for Mr. Royce, for I believe the Hatchet would have killed him before he could have drawn a breath, had that hand with the gun ever started to raise.

The villainous liquor appeared to warm the dancers to further exertions. On Singer's insistence, we danced. Kentuck's partner was one of the visiting "kinswomen." She had the boldest eyes I ever saw, and she was not without a sort of reckless, wild beauty. She was tall, for a native, and danced with a grace that was almost pantherish. She wore what appeared to be a cast-off silk dress such as dance-hall women sometimes wore. Kentuck had her as a partner in the waltz, and I was surprised to see how well she succeeded. He came back laughing and panting, and said: "What did you think of the Big Chicken?"

"Big Chicken! Is that her name?"

"I don't know; but that's what I called her, and she seemed to like it. She's an educated *klootch*—that is, in some ways. Been out at Juneau for three years. Long enough to have learned to believe that the mission teachers down at the Holy Cross are a lot of fools,

and that about the only thing worth having is plenty of money. By George! Look at that Sioux watching her!"

Truly the Hatchet's eyes were following her as she went round the room, and she, at least, had no objections to *hutchnu*, for she took the jug from beneath the fiddler's chair, hoisted it on her arm in a manner betokening experience, and took a long pull at its contents.

"Good girl!" boisterously applauded Royce, taking the jug from her hands and following her example, while the Hatchet again backed against the wall, and held his unwavering eyes on him with a look that I should not have cared to have bestowed on me.

"That buck'll get him yet, unless he gets the buck first," Jim predicted in my ear. "Begins to look like heavy weather. Maybe we'd better pull out."

I think we should have done so had not some of the natives by the wall begun one of their weird songs, called the "Song of the Canoe," and they interested us, as they sat there swaying their bodies sidewise, and chanting in a monotonous voice. Others joined in, until the whole side of the room seemed bending in that almost hypnotic regularity of motion.

136 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

The singing became more boisterous as they took up another song, and the Big Chicken suddenly got to her feet, and plunged into the little back room of the cabin. She was gone several minutes, and when she returned two couples had begun waltzing, humming as they went, for the musicians had fallen into a pan of doughnuts, and refused to interrupt their feast. The Big Chicken emerged, looking full of Indian devilment; and Royce, seeing her, stumbled across the room, and caught her in his arms.

“ This dance goes for me! ” he vociferated, and they began to hum with the others, and circle, without reversing. There was some peculiarity in the sound of their shuffling feet. Something that went “ clack, clack, clack! ” with a crunching, metallic rhythm. Suddenly an old squaw at the side of the room leaped to her feet, and shrilled: “ Ah-h-h-h! ” Others sprang up, and drew back against the wall. The other couples stopped, but Royce and the Big Chicken went dizzily on, and the sound was more audible in the silence that seemed to have stopped other sound. All around me natives were straining forward, and, following their direction, I, too, looked.

In the dull light, as she whirled and her short

THE GOLDEN MOCCASINS 137

skirts lifted, something at her feet shone gleaming. It was my turn to be held spellbound, for she was dancing, heavily and noisily, in the moccasins of red gold.

CHAPTER X

A GRIM TALE

WE hurried back across the river, and stopped in the Honolulu to get warm. Cavanaugh was there with Doctor Sidebotham, and looked at me wonderingly as we came in.

"The moccasins are back," I said to him, and he looked up at me with expressionless eyes.

"Where did you see them?"

"Over at Singer's dance. An up-river squaw had them on. They call her the Big Chicken."

"That so? By the way, you're in late to-night, aren't you?"

I explained to him that I had planned to roll blankets on the floor of Windy Jim's cabin.

"Oh, I can beat that," he objected. "Jim's got two good bunks. Kentuck can go with him, and you come over to my cabin. I've two good bunks, and it's cozy. I want to have a talk with you."

My companions agreed, and we bade the

others good-night, and hurried across the crackling snow to the cabin at the rear of the trading post, which I had never entered. Cavanaugh went in ahead of me, and lighted a heavy library lamp, that seemed incongruous so far from the outer world and its concomitants.

I looked around. One side of the room was literally filled with books, the only open space being a square in the center, where a double window was let in. Everything about the room bespoke the artist. It was divided by a portière made of shotgun and cartridge shells, with pebbles of country rock clutched in with buckskin thongs. A couch was covered with a polar-bear skin; and another skin of the same kind, the most magnificent I have ever seen, formed the rug, which was laid down over curiously woven native matting, stained into patterns. The rafters above were stained to dark brown, and were carved with totem signs.

Beyond the hangings a dresser, evidently from the outside, was littered with rare old silver toilet articles, and I saw at the first glance that they bore an Irish crest in raised gold. In one corner was a cottage organ, and I wondered how he had succeeded in importing it all this distance. It was littered with music, and

opened on it was a book of exercises, which he saw me staring at.

"Bess," he said. "I used to play a little, and so I give her lessons as best I can. She is very musical. She is about the only person beside the doctor, that I ever invite here into my privacy, so you see you are honored. I had the extra bunk built in and fitted so that when Father Barnum comes through he can make this his home. He makes it up this way about once a year."

As he talked in these disjointed sentences, he removed his mackinaw coat and moccasins, and pulled on a pair of worn slippers, and then took my hat and parka, and set a box of cigars on a tabouret made from caribou horns.

"You are comfortable," I said, glancing around his quarters.

"Yes. I am by nature a sybarite. Wait. I've a new pair of slippers at your disposal. All fixed, are you? Here, let me give you this other chair. It's a favorite of mine. Gives you that rested feeling."

He lighted a cigar, and suddenly looked straight at me, and said: "I knew the moccasins of gold had been brought back. I know how she came to have them. And I know all of the end. It's not pleasant. You may laugh

at me, but I believe the curse still holds good.”

He settled himself back farther into his chair, and the light of the lamp behind shadowed his face, but enlivened the silver of his hair. As he talked, he took the cigar from his mouth, and gesticulated with it, watching, sometimes, its little spirals of pale-blue smoke.

“Both Marie Barstow—she that was the foolish little Marie Devinne—and Spider Riggs, whose real name was something else, are dead. They paid the penalty, and Barstow executed them as cruelly as ever any man could conceive. He must have been as mad as any of those who ever went after the red gold. The squaw you saw wearing them was given the name of Mary down at the mission. I’ve known her and her brother, Constantine, for years. He worked for me two seasons. He doesn’t lie. He is more than intelligent. Mary came honestly by the moccasins. He told me so. He told me the story, and I asked him to say nothing more about it, because the less said about the cursed gold the better. I’ve seen men die like flies in the fall by the side of the trails for less. And there was but little more attention paid to them than if they were dead flies. There is nothing so heartless as a stampede. So Constantine will never talk.”

He got up, and brought out a decanter of brandy, and poured moderate drinks, then settled himself, and resumed:

“ Constantine and Mary were coming down from Forty Mile. Marook told him last fall that if he came back here he would give him a lay on that Hunter Creek claim of his, and Constantine came down to work it. His sister’s brighter than any squaw I ever met, but she’s—well, she’s too civilized. It spoils them. They get to know too much. They want too much. It would have been better, far better, for her to have rested there in the kindly shelter and care of the Holy Cross. Constantine has hard work to control her. Up this side of the flats they heard a shot, and they naturally went to see what it was. It was off on the bank. It was what was left of Spider Riggs. His feet were frozen, and he had not waited to go to sleep in the snow. And I’ve no prayer for his soul, because he was bad, clean through. Constantine lashed him up in a tree, where the wolves couldn’t get at him, and left him there.

“ The trail was hard going, and the day was bad. The wind had come up along the river, and you know what that means. About ten miles farther on they were just in time to see something wavering and staggering along the

edge of it, and it fell before they got to it. It was Marie. She was wandering in her mind, as her poor feet had wandered through life, so they put up their tent in a clump of trees on the bank and made camp. They did all they could for her before the end, but she couldn't survive. The cold and the exhaustion had got in their work, and for twelve hours she babbled along about what had taken place disjointedly, and never had sanity until within the hour she died.

“Partly from what she said then, and from what they gathered from her delirium, they know what happened. And Constantine came here, troubled, to tell it all to me, when he found out that Sam Barstow was dead, and that he couldn't deliver Marie's last message, which didn't amount to much, being merely: ‘Please find Sam, and tell him that Marie, his little Marie, is sorry, so sorry, and tired, so tired, and that she hopes he will forget, and will never again go after the red gold.’ That was all. I fancy I can see her as she said it, gasping out her life there in a tent on the Yukon, with the wind howling through the trees and around outside. She paid the price!

“Marie Devinne never loved Sam Barstow. She was fascinated by that Spider Riggs. She

had promised to marry him long before Sam went away on that trip to the north with Pitkok, who betrayed the secrets of the old men of his tribe, and led a white man to the place where the gold is red. She was no better nor no worse than any other dance-hall girl in any other camp. She was not nearly so immoral as unmoral, and was what life and men had made her. She was a combination of what was left of the tenderness and sympathy of a woman's nature, and the mercenary woman of the camps, seeking nothing so much as a home stake, and the gold to buy baubles, and silks, and gayety, and entertainment.

“ The remnant of good left in her was nearly wiped away under the tutelage of that black-guard Riggs, after she came to this camp and was fascinated by his outward varnish of gentility. He undermined all the good in Marie Devinne as surely as the devil undermines any of us, if he gets us in the right condition. He made her think that all they needed to be married and to go outside and live that other life, was money in plenty, and he made her believe that life was a joke, and that so long as one had money enough, everything went easily.

“ Sam Barstow was soured by ill luck. He had starved and worked and trailed in this

country, froze, and slaved, and hoped, until everything hardened within him except that one dream, the possession of Marie Devinne. About the last straw with him was when his partner up on Birch Creek carried away all their stake from clean-up and sale that had been cached in the trader's safe, and went out on a steamer, leaving Sam waiting for him on the creek. The man wasn't quite right from that time on, as far as his love of humanity went; for he distrusted nearly everyone, save the dance-hall girl.

“ He made love to her in his way, and I hoped that he would marry her, and keep on trying, because there was a whole lot of good in Sam Barstow, as I knew him a few years ago—the old Sam. He was much of a man; but he had fallen in love with a heartless little fool, who couldn't understand him any more than a fox could understand a lion. He asked her to marry him, and she twiddled her fingers under his nose and told him she would when he had money enough to take her outside, and let her live like a real lady—whatever that meant in her estimation. She couldn't appreciate the honest love of an honest man, and a clean name and a forgotten and forgiven past. All that, the cleanliness and decency of life, meant noth-

ing to her. She was playing with him, because she wanted to be the wife of Spider Riggs, ex-racetrack tout and tinhorn gambler!

“ So Sam Barstow was tempted by Pitkok, who had been tempted by the legend of red gold, and couldn't go after it alone because he couldn't get credit from anybody on earth for an outfit, and wouldn't take the time and trouble to work for it. Pitkok told him about it, and the range of mountains where it was said to be, away up there on the far edge of the *tundra*, between the strange landmarks, a peak thin as a needle, and by it, on one side, one which looks like a devil's face, and on the other a third that resembles an eagle squatted with his head between his shoulders.

“ The sagas know, and have known, for hundreds of years, perhaps, where they were—this spot that is accursed by God and eschewed by them. Not many of them, it is true, but one of them who did know had told Pitkok, and Pitkok, wanderer, came to regard gold, any man's gold, as the ultimate glory of life, for he had seen how white men struggled, and scraped, and worked, or murdered, for it.

“ Barstow and Pitkok met at an unfortunate time, it seems, when the native was ready

to sell his secret for an outfit and a half interest in what they might get, and Sam was willing to sell anything, his soul possibly, for Marie Devinne, the little girl of the Horn Spoon hall. So they went away together, and Pitkok didn't come back. He had gone on his last wandering trip, and he, too, had paid the price.


"Barstow returned, and no one knew that he had found it, not even I, with whom he had banked his money before he left—amounting to an even eight thousand dollars in dust at seventeen fifty an ounce, which is what the company allows for up-river gold. But he told Marie, and exaggerated the amount he had brought back. She thought he had a fortune, not appreciating the fact that when a man walks away with about twenty thousand dollars' worth of low-grade gold on his back, he has a mule's load if he wants to travel very many miles. She was one of those who didn't know that it takes a freight car to carry a fortune in that metal, and that the man who says he would be contented with all the gold he could carry doesn't want much!

"It was Riggs' chance. People didn't know it, but he practically owned that table and its bank roll. He leased the privilege. Anything that came across that table was his. He saw

that this was his chance to win Sam Barstow's discovery and his savings. He corrupted Marie's last remnant of honesty and self-respect, as men have, from time immemorial, corrupted women—through love! She loved him! She would do anything for him. He made black look white, only they must win, and probably he told her it didn't matter, because Sam could get more gold, and would not miss what they took away from him. So she joined forces with him, and ran to the limit because she loved him, and wanted him, and wanted to get away from it all, and didn't love Sam.

“ That night, when Sam played in the Horn Spoon and she kept the cases, he was ‘ rooked.’ Spider Riggs had taught her how, and practiced the signals with her so that the cases wouldn't tabulate the crookedness; but Sam fooled them. He thought the deal was fair, because Marie kept the cases. Instead of playing the fortune they supposed he possessed, he only played and lost the money he had in my safe. Then his luck turned, devil's luck, as it proved—the luck of the red gold—and he broke Abramsky, who was honest as the day.

“ Then he went back to Spider Riggs' table, and Marie was not at the cases, and Spider couldn't work a crooked deal, and the devil's



luck held, for he broke Spider Riggs, and went away that night worth about eighteen thousand dollars in money, and when the men who owned the Horn Spoon backed Spider out of sympathy, and because they had a percentage in the game, he broke them, too, and owned that estimable place of gayety—that sodden place of misfortune!

“But Riggs was well named. He was a spider, and with webs broken, he calmly spun new and slimy coils. He talked Marie into marrying Sam, explaining to her that divorces were easily obtained and alimony abundant, and she fell again. She was ready to sacrifice the last thing she had to give for the love of Spider Riggs.

“And Sam, poor fool, blundered on, unseeing, undiscerning, and undismayed. He was happy in that last lap of his course. That girl was an angel to him. No matter what she was to anyone else, to him she was the woman of dreams, audacious, impertinent, fascinating wife and companion. Life had not dealt softly with him, and it was a long cry from mud-floored cabins and trying trails and short rations to a home which he regarded as the ultimate splendor of luxury, a wife who was better than any that had ever lived, and the pro-

prietorship of two great things—the Horn Spoon and the secret of the red gold.

“His fool’s paradise was short-lived. He, too, must pay the price! He wanted more luxury, as you know, and went down to Taninaw to buy foolish furnishings and china plates, and carpets, and table luxuries, from the steamboat *Healy* laid up there for the winter. He had money, and wanted to spend it for the foolish Marie.”

He paused for a moment, and rested with the tips of his fingers touching before him as he lounged in his chair, and I saw that his eyes were fixed on the ceiling.

“Now, I don’t know all that took place, of course,” he said slowly, “but I fancy I can conjecture it all, and fill in the blanks, from what she told Constantine, and what he heard of her raving. But it seems to me that she began to admire this rough, crude man, who believed in her, and had clean ideas, and would have died for her; but she had not the strength of character to resist the Spider, who was patiently waiting, true to the name, in his outer den. He had not lost touch with her, and his ambitions were unchanged.

“Sam, still blundering and believing, had laid his whole life bare to her without reserva-

tion. One can readily understand how she asked him curious questions, for she must have had curiosity. And his mental processes were simple and direct, and she was entitled to as much or more confidence than a male partner, for she was his partner for life.

“And so she told Spider Riggs that she knew where the peculiar gold came from, and perhaps gloated over her knowledge, and Spider Riggs saw another lever to lift his aims. Could he but induce the girl who was faltering in her allegiance to him to betray her husband, he could get that secret, so he redoubled his efforts, and added to his intentions, and became more smooth, insinuating, and slimy than ever.

“On the night when Sam Barstow came home, vastly unexpected, and found Spider Riggs there with his wife, the black truth stared him in the face. If ever a man went mad in a minute, it was he. Nothing could palliate the shock.

“Madness lent him endurance. Tired as he was, he drove them out on the trail—the cold, night trail—unceasingly, tied together with a rope, and carrying the red-gold moccasins as their only fortune, for a full twenty-four hours. He gave them neither tent for shelter, nor food! He knew that he was driving them to their

death as certainly as he knew that his life was a wreck.

“ Riggs was a craven in the last moments after that discovery. He dropped to his knees and cried, as babies cry, and lied, as liars lie, laying the blame for it all on Marie. Poor girl! My sympathies are all with her as she saw that unmitigated poltroon prove his worthlessness, there on his knees, half-clad, begging for his life at her expense, while over them stood a madman, with an unwavering gun in his hand, sternly condemning them to a torturing death. And from what I gather, even as this house of cards proved itself, her pride rallied, and she made no appeal.

“ Think of it! For almost twenty-four hours they walked, this desolate trio, until in the end she had fallen so often that Barstow thought it was the end, and left them. Spider Riggs, the delicate, must have had more iron in his blood than she, for he was still on his feet. Once he had been off them, and that was when, after sobbing uselessly, and murmuring appeals to the implacable Sam, he had faced about, and begged to be shot. The madman behind had calmly knocked him down, and said that he wanted to hear no more, or he would cut out his tongue.

“ The only mercy he showed him was when he left, and gave Spider Riggs an empty gun, and his insane cunning was displayed by the fact that after he walked a hundred yards down the trail he threw back one cartridge. Just one, mind you, not two, which would have spelled an end to both their miseries. He wanted them to think of that one cartridge, as they staggered ahead, waiting for hard and painful death. He wanted to prove to her, in the last offering, that the man whom she had loved would be poltroon enough to use it on himself rather than speed her to a merciful and sudden end.

“ They unlashed themselves when Sam turned back and began that dreary progress, hating each other; but the final contempt must have crept into her mind when Spider Riggs seized a remnant of food they had secreted, and went away with the pistol. She fell on the trail repeatedly, but that strange after-facility and toughness of feminine endurance asserted itself, as time after time she made a fresh attempt. She clung to life more fervently than she had ever clung to anything else, and was big enough, in the end, to send back a brave message to dead ears! It was her only appeal.


“ The foolish Marie was a woman at last,

too late, and to me there is a splendor in that end—that uprising, new-born nobility which would not descend to speeding back a curse to the man who had driven her, unforgiving of frailties, to that lonely passage from life on a mat of fir boughs in a wind-swept tent. Of the three she was the most noble, and met her end without whimpering, in the consciousness that she had earned it.

“She had but one thing to give her would-be rescuers—the secret of the red gold, and the moccasins made of that gold that had been her temptation downward. And I doubt if that well-meant gift does not prove a mistaken kindness. I wonder!”

He suddenly stood on his feet, smothered the end of his cigar butt in a homemade ash tray, and pointed toward the bed I was to occupy.

“That’s yours,” he said. “I’m going to turn in. Good-night!”



CHAPTER XI

KENTUCKY HEARS A TALE

ONE of the most astonishing traits of life is that ease with which we form likes or dislikes, loves or enmities. Sparhawk was nothing to me. I had seen him on but one occasion; I knew nothing, and cared less of his past. All that I knew was that he was not the kind of a man for whose companionship I cared. Indeed, of the two men, Sparhawk and Royce, I held a higher opinion of the former; yet it was Sparhawk who was to become my enemy.

It was the morning after the dance that I sat for a while in the post watching the trader, who, with grave face, appeared to be cleaning out or checking up the contents of his safe. Sometimes he threw out heavy little packages with scarcely a look at them, then again he would find something that appeared to puzzle him, and these bundles he untied and inspected. Sometimes his face expressed annoyance when he scanned a roll of papers, and I surmised they represented bad debts. Bessie Wilton was mak-

ing a brave attempt to display some of the heterogeneous wares with which the huge old log house was filled, shifting canned goods here and there to bring regularity of labels, or evening up the shallow piles of prints and denims. We heard the stamping of feet outside the door, and presently it swung open and Sparhawk entered, looking somewhat the worse for his debauch of the night before. He walked to the side of the big drum stove and removed his mittens before he spoke and then called, over his shoulder:

“ Got any tobaccer fit for a white man to smoke, Trader? ”

I saw Bessie stop her work and make as if to answer; but Cavanaugh's voice replied.

“ We have the kind that about everyone in this camp smokes. It seems to satisfy most men.”

“ What kind is it? ”

“ T. & W.”

“ Humph! Like that kind of muck, do they? It's just about as good as plain Siwash, which is a little worse'n ' sheep-dip.' ”

Cavanaugh went back to the sorting of his papers, and Sparhawk proceeded, with rough volubility, to express his opinion of the trading companies, the trading posts, and the camp,

in language that was scarcely fit, yet not sufficiently unusual, for Miss Wilton's hearing. She thought best to interrupt him.

"If you wish any of the tobacco," she said, coming down the little aisle behind the counter, "I will get it for you."

He seemed for the first time to be aware of her beauty, as he turned and looked at her, and gave a soft whistle, as if astonished.

"Where'd you blow in from, Kid?" he asked. And then before anyone could interrupt, robbed his speech of roughness by declaring, heartily, that she could give him ten pounds of the luxury.

As she walked around the room to serve him, he sauntered over and leaned an elbow, and rested a leg on the counter, and stared at her in a way intended to be warm and friendly.

"Say," he said, "I didn't know they had such a likely lookin' gal here in this tradin' post, or I reckon I'd have spent all my time here since I hit the camp. Where was you yesterday when me and Royce was in here?"

She did not answer, but hummed a little air to herself as if intensely occupied with her task. He was not abashed.

"White gals is right scarce in this neck of

the woods," he ventured. " Particularly peaches, like you be."

" Is there anything else you want? " she demanded, still ignoring his familiarity.

" Yes, you," he remarked, leering at her.

By this time my temper had arisen to the point where I proposed to interfere; but I was spared that trouble. Cavanaugh suddenly walked toward the girl and said, " Bessie, you had better go up to your cabin now and work at the books. I'll finish waiting on this man."

As if glad of the opportunity to escape, and with a side smile at me, she hastened from behind the counter and out through the door. Sparhawk watched her as she went, and then turned an insolently bold face toward the trader.

" Yum! Yum! " he chuckled. " It looks to me as if I've got to sort of keep hangin' around here more'n I have been! That is sure some sweet baby! "

Cavanaugh suddenly leaned toward him, and from where I sat I could see the set muscles of his face. And they were set in a way that was new to me. They suggested something of that rumor which marked him as deadly.

" So you think you'll hang around here more,



do you? Well, I make no apology for saying that you'll do nothing of the kind," he remarked. "In fact, if you say anything more about the young lady whose guardian I happen to be, you'll not hang around the camp very long, either."

Sparhawk's face lost its grin, and he took a step or two backward.

"Well, say, Boss," he replied, "I didn't go for to give no offense. I'm a——"

"That's all that is necessary!" snapped the trader. "Only that you will perhaps remember that I do not permit anyone to make remarks concerning Miss Wilton. What else do you want to buy?"

Sparhawk looked around, winked at me, named some smaller provisions, and stood silent while Cavanaugh tied up the bundle. The poke that fell on the counter was fairly heavy, and Cavanaugh, as if in haste to be rid of his customer, manipulated the gold scales rapidly, and took out his dole. He tied and tossed the poke back, and before Sparhawk could put it in his pocket, was again fumbling in front of his safe with his back turned on the objectionable one. Sparhawk, as if to assert his independence, whistled gayly as he passed out into the open, and noisily slammed the door behind him. Al-

most unconsciously I turned and spat as if to relieve my mouth of a bad taste, and from that instant had a well-formed dislike for the adventurer. Cavanaugh looked up at me with his slow smile and said, "That man will have trouble, I fear, before long, unless he assumes a different air in this camp."

What reply I might have made was not voiced, for just then the door opened boisterously, and in came Kentucky, loudly demanding when we were to "hit the trail."

"Now," said I, anxious to leave the camp behind.

I bade Cavanaugh good-by, and pulled my parka tighter around my throat, the laps of my cap down over my ears, and led the way. Kentucky whistled as he followed behind me through the length of the camp, and until we had passed the last cabin and swung out toward the long incline leading to the first divide, when it became necessary for him to husband his breath and settle into the steady plod of the outward bound. As we gained the rise we saw ahead of us, outlined against the snow and working in and out among the bare silver birches, the forms of other travelers; but did not waste time in speculation as to their identity. Rapidly we gained on them, and at last

overtook a heavily loaded sled, pulled by worn dogs. Toiling along, and floundering here and there in the snow at the side, was a man with the gee pole in one hand, and a rope across his shoulder, dragging to his full strength; and behind, bent far forward, and planting her moccasins heavily on the snow to get solid foothold, was a squaw. We came abreast of them, and discovered that it was Constantine and his sister, Mary, the Big Chicken, taking their outfit up to Marook's claim on Hunter Creek. The girl's face had lost its cheerfulness of the night before, and she looked sullen and discontented. Constantine was grave and steady.

Remembering the story told me by Cavanaugh, I eyed them with much interest, and paused long enough to exchange a few words, and to tell Constantine where there was a short cut which would save him some work.

"Gee! But doesn't the Big Chicken look ugly this mornin'?" Kentucky laughed after we had passed them. "Don't blame her. If I had gold moccasins, and was a *klootch*, I'd want to dog it a while, instead of slippin' off my glad rags, gettin' into a denim parka, and heavin' myself against a sled."

I wondered if he suspected all that was told

by the red gold; but, on thought, was certain that he did not, for I doubted whether even Bessie Wilton was aware of the details.

"I wouldn't mind havin' those golden shoes along about now, myself," he said, with a sigh, and I felt sorry for him, knowing that money alone was all that prevented him from fulfillment of his happiness. My twinge of jealousy returned for an instant, and I had to fight it down.

As we plodded along in the brightness of the morning and the bracing cold, we heard someone swinging through the turn of the trail coming from the creek, and in a minute more a voice shouted: "Hello, there! Is that you, Kentucky? I've been looking for you. You're just the man I want."

It was the prosperous McGraw, who had the best claim on our gulch.

"What's up?" questioned Kentucky hopefully.

"You aren't doing anything, are you, just now?"

"No. Sorry to admit it. Want a good, husky young feller like me?"

"Yes. I want you to do some assessment work for me. I've got two claims on Hunter Creek, and you can do them both. Cavanaugh

tells me that a native named Constantine is going to be on the creek with his sister. They've got a cabin there, and when they come maybe you could arrange to get in their cabin and save a tent and big outfit."

"Good! You're on," exclaimed Kentucky, in delight. "And they're on the way out now, with an outfit. I'll go right back with you, and find out about the cabin. You don't mind, do you, Tom?"

"Mind?" I laughed at his boyish question. "No, I'm glad you've struck something. Certainly it's best for you to go back and ask them."

They left me to finish my journey alone, and tell Dan of the reappearance of the gaudy footwear that had been connected with so much of tragedy.

Kentucky was not a laggard. Before the day was over he appeared, pulling a sled with some tools, food, and blankets, and announced that he had made his arrangements with Constantine, and was going over to begin work. By purchase we had added two more dogs to our team, which with Malicula and Barsick made four. We offered to lend them to Kentuck, but he declined.

"I'll run over and see you every evening or

two," he called back, as he went hurrying on down the trail.

And he kept his promise, for he was in our cabin but three nights later, and threw himself on the spare bunk to smoke and talk. He was in higher spirits, and was amused by his new quarters.

"Funniest mix-up I ever saw," he declared. "The Big Chicken's got a grouch that makes the candles smoky, and I reckon that Constantine's got a mighty big job to keep her from desertin' the ship, and goin' back to the igloos. They don't know I can understand 'em, and so I just sit around and try to look like a fool. And the funniest part of it is that the Hatchet showed up the second day, and he's got the hypnotic eye on the Big Chicken, and Constantine don't like that; but can't just see how to help himself. The Hatchet loves me! Oh, yes! Maybe he thinks I want to win that squaw. And say!"

He suddenly sat up on the edge of the bunk, and bumped his head against the one above it. He rubbed the bruise, but went on, without referring to it:

"I've seen the golden shoes! They're peaches, all right! The Big Chicken showed 'em to me, and Constantine was sore. He says

there's a cuss on the gold they're made of; but the Big Chicken thinks it's a right good sort of a cuss, and I agreed with her."

"Wouldn't mind if this claim was cursed with it a while, myself," said Dan gloomily, remembering the fact that we were still without pay dirt, although we had crosscut more than two-thirds of the way across the gulch.

Doubtless he was thinking of all those dependent on the remittances from the Ocean Bank that had failed and left them without means, and cut off from communication with their protector. After that Kentucky's cheerful remarks sounded like chatter, and I was not sorry when he left. It seemed as if that night were the beginning of more afflictions for Dan, for he woke up in the morning with a badly swollen face, and all indications that he would suffer from an abscess on his cheek bone.

"Better go down and see Doctor Sidebotham," I said; but he insisted on working that day and the next, and even the dogs were neglected by him, though they leaped around him for the touch of his caressing hand, and the sound of his caressing voice.

I had heated hot-water bottles, and put them against his swaddled face, and was just preparing to blow out the light, when we heard a

sound out in the stillness of the night, where the solitude was so vast that even the fall of snow from a pine bough became a crash. It was someone coming hastily up the trail. We waited for the visitor, who banged at the door, and then opened it. It was Kentucky Smith.

He was breathless as he shut the door behind him, and leaned against it for a moment, then looked around.

"Late, ain't I?" he said. "But I couldn't wait to tell you all what I heard. Hello! What's the matter with you, Dan? Got toothache?"

My partner nodded, and I explained in words; but Kentucky's sympathy was overcome by his anxiety to explain his errand.

"Say," he blurted out excitedly, "I ran most of the way here to tell you somethin'. You know I told you that the Hatchet, that Sioux, was makin' goo-goo eyes at the Big Chicken, and that Constantine didn't stand for it very well, and that none of 'em knew I understood their lingo? Well, there's big doin's about to come off. Three or four days, I reckon. The Hatchet and the Big Chicken are goin' to gallop off together, and you cain't calculate where! They're goin' after the ground where

that sorrel gold comes from! True, I swear it!"

He threw himself on a stool, and Dan forgot his miseries, and lifted himself to his elbow, intent. Kentuck tossed his hat on the bunk, and wiped his forehead, and pulled his blue parka over his head, and smoothed down his hair. He began talking again, pouring out his words in a far more rapid flow than his accustomed drawl, and rolled a cigarette as he talked.

"I don't get all of it, you understand, but I get the run of it—the conversation, I mean. I had been up to fix my fires, because I'm mighty eager to give McGraw somethin' more than assessment work. I want to find somethin' for him, so I'm sinkin' in what seems to be the best place in the draw. The trail around the cabin's soft, because there ain't been many people walkin' over it.

"Just as I came to one side of the cabin, it seemed to me I heard somethin' on the other, and I was right curious. I stood still. The door opened after a minute, and out comes a black shape that I recognized as that fool, Big Chicken. She slips around the corner away from me, and so I just naturally slips around the other. I had an idea Constantine, who is all right and a good feller, was asleep.

“There’s another black shape out there when I pokes my head around, and it was the Hatchet. I pulled back mighty sudden, because they were not more than three feet from me, and I could hear everything they said. As far as I can make out, whoever gave her those moccasins told her where the gold came from, and the Hatchet has talked her into goin’ after it. They’d have taken Constantine, but he doesn’t like the Hatchet. So they’re goin’ to leave him. She’d put it up to him before, but he’s afraid of the ghosts, and set his foot down, and said she shouldn’t go anywhere or tell anyone if he could help it.”

He paused to roll a cigarette for Dan, and then went on:

“The Big Chicken’s some soft on this Hatchet man, because he’s different from a Siwash. She’s agreed to go with him. They’re goin’ to pull out. I cain’t understand that native way of tellin’ days by the full moon; but as near as I can make out, the Hatchet leaves in a week or so for Taninaw. She’s to tell Constantine that she’s sick of livin’ on Hunter Creek, and is goin’ down to the village; but she goes right on. She is to meet the Hatchet down by the Ramparts. Then they go to Taninaw, and tell folks they’re buck and

squaw, all right, lay in some grub, and pull out.

“ And they don’t go up the Taninaw the way they’re to make believe. They start in that direction, then make a big circle, and come back on the north side of the Yukon in that little river that comes in about there, and they’re to go up to its head, and over the Yukon hills and off north, to where it seems they reckon Sam Barstow found that gold. Now, what do you think of that? ”

He paused with an air of triumph, and Dan lifted himself still higher in his bunk, while I thought of all that was involved.

“ You mean that the thing to do is to trail ’em? ” Dan mumbled.

“ Sure! Get after ’em, and stake the claims next to theirs. They cain’t grab it all! ”

Dan, holding his hand to his swollen face, looked wistful.

“ I’d think over takin’ a chance,” he said, “ if my jaw was better. But pshaw! Tom and me’d be fools! We’re bound to get somethin’ here, sooner or later. What’s the use! ”

He settled back into his bunk again, and nestled his aching face against the water bottles. Kentucky looked his disappointment.

“ You can’t tell anything about the reliabil-

ity of these native yarns, anyway," Dan added. "If I'd follered every trail of that kind I've heard about since I've been in this country, I'd have been trail-worn to a shadow, and so sore-footed my moccasins wouldn't hold my feet. Of course, Barstow got it somewhere; but nobody can see whether the Big Chicken or anybody else has any idea. And Sam's dead."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell them what I knew, and the words were fluttering in my mouth, when I checked myself, remembering that Cavanaugh had told me in a confidential mood. I did not share the trader's superstition, nor the Indian belief, that this gold, or any gold taken from the earth, was foredoomed to bring evil on those who found it. I saw in the grewsome tale connected with it merely a history of oversuffering in the case of Bill Wilton, and coincidence in the turgid drama played by Pitkok, Barstow, Marie Devinne, and Spider Riggs.

Gold, being inanimate, might not choose its masters, and on them rested the responsibility for its use. To attempt to trail the Big Chicken and her Sioux lover would be no pygmy's task; but, with our own claim proving fallow, I might have undertaken it had Dan been agreeable. Now it was out of the question, and, moreover,

there was nothing but Kentucky's eavesdropping, conjectures, and partial knowledge of the native tongue, to cause consideration. It seemed best that I should join with Dan's attitude.

"Oh, forget all about it," I said. "It might be a chance, but the odds are it would prove a fake. Go home, and go to bed, and make up your mind that if you can find something for McGraw, he'll do better by you than lead you off on a wild-goose chase."

I saw the boyish enthusiasm in Kentuck's eyes die away to a look of disappointment, and he put his hat on his head.

"Mind you, Kentuck," I added, "we're grateful to you for coming over to tell us about this; but we are the singed ducks. We have stampeded too many times. If it goes to anything more certain, there will be time enough for us to join in. How does McGraw's claim look? Any colors, or have you got down to the gravel yet?"

He would not permit me to change the subject, and sat there for an hour offering arguments in favor of his hope. And he went away dejected because we had not immediately enthused with him, and grasped what he believed to be an opportunity. In five minutes after he

172 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

left, our cabin was dark and still, and Dan, worn out from work and two restless nights, was asleep, while I, on my back, and with wide eyes, stared at the window opening, whose little squares, befogged by the outer frost, looked like pallid sheets stuck upon the wall.

CHAPTER XII

SPARHAWK AND I DO BATTLE

THERE is a point of physical endurance, where even the rarest fortitude breaks. The executioners and torturers of old knew this, but it was not within their power to inflict such suffering as comes, occasionally, in the course of ordinary lives. And so it was that my stoic partner's fortitude gave way, and he arose from his bunk after another sleepless night with a grumbling surrender.

"I think," he said, "that I shall have to give in. I'm going down to the camp to make a call on the doctor."


"Good!" I exclaimed. "I thought you would come to it sooner or later. That is what I asked you to do in the first place. I'll go down with you, and we will have this affair over with. And what's more, we will take the dogs. It isn't much fun to run with a jumping jaw, and the exercise will do them good. You can ride."

He tried to object, but there was a weakness

of will in his expression and, regardless of his assertion that he did not "propose to be molly-coddled," I went out and called them to the harness, which they reluctantly accepted. Yet, so strong is habit, they dropped to their accustomed places, and the big gray Malicula appeared even eager to assert his proud position of leader; for he stood over the outstrung leashes and barked, and whined, and threatened, while the others again became servitors in the team. I slipped the harness over his big, loyal head and stopped to pat him before I straightened up and shouted toward the blank wall of the cabin that all was in readiness.

Dan, muffled into his parka hood until his head looked inordinately large, came out, closed the door behind him, and climbed into the sled while I restrained the big, plunging beast that was eager to swing out after me into the wintry trail.

"All right?" I queried in a shout that sounded ridiculously loud in that great stillness, and, on receiving an assent, led the way on a run. Malicula fell in behind me so closely that now and then I had to warn him off my heels. The light sled slipped over the snow, the dogs quieted to a persistent trot, and the hard trail seemed to glide from beneath us as we hurried



away on our merciful errand. We crossed the long white space of the big stream and climbed the slopes beyond. We trotted over the white expanse which in summer was a moss-covered *tundra* with huge lumps, "nigger-heads," to impede progress and trap the unwary. We scaled the slope back of the camp, and shot downward with a rush, to halt, panting, before the surgeon's door.

"Here we are!" I cried, with an attempt at jocularity, which appeared to fall flat under the circumstances, and as Dan passed in, led the dogs around to the rear of the cabin where I knew there was a hospitable little "shack" devoted to the warmth of trail-heated dogs. Into this warm shelter I turned the team, knowing that our stay in the camp might consume the better part of a day. I slipped the harness from them at the door and put them in, one by one, with the exception of *Malicula*, whom I allowed to remain at large as my companion. And so we two went back to the doctor's door, which we opened and entered.

"If I had drills better adapted to this work," the doctor declared, as we stood inside, "it would be a comparatively simple matter; but this is liable to be a painful operation performed by hand."


It did not sound promising for my suffering partner, who was leaned back across a home-made chair with a painfully opened mouth.

"Dan will have to stay here for two or three days at least," declared Sidebotham, looking at me. "I'll have to make a way of draining this. He should have come sooner."

I suppressed the "I-told-you-so" which tripped to the end of my tongue.

The doctor began his work with the small supply of tools at his command, and I sat closely by, compassionate yet helpless. It was at least an hour before my partner and I stood out in front of the door, he with a sense of relief, and I with nothing but words to help him to recovery. His head was muffled to speechlessness. That portion of his face which showed was white and drawn. We turned down toward the main street of the camp, and with slow steps traversed its length. I left him in conversation with Hopkins, for, to be truthful, I hoped sadly for a minute's or more talk with Bessie Wilton.

Slowly I made my way down to the post. I opened the door and stared within. Three or four prospectors were standing with hands comfortably behind them, warming themselves in front of the hospitable stove. The smoke of their pipes and cigarettes wafted upward into



a cloud in the quiet, dark, upper surface of the place. The smell of pelts and sugar, of rice and kerosene, blended as usual into a homely savor of welcome. Cavanaugh lounged across his counter, his slender, masterful fingers drumming on the pine board beneath him. The roar of the fire, sweeping out through the drum, sounded large and strange in that little nook in the great wilderness—for wilderness it was, despite the tiny work of men who were but pygmies in its vast heart. Taciturn men they were—men of short sentences, and each break of the silence was pregnant with some thought vital to each. The tales of far-off camps, the spoken records of pans, the chronicles of privations and miseries, all were expressed in brevity. I looked around the counters, ever seeking behind them a face. Bessie was not there! I made my way to the group, joined it, and, like its members, stood with my hands behind me, feeling for warmth. It is a wonderful action—that feeling for heat in climes where the blood chills unaware!

Not until then did I realize that *Malicula* had not followed me in. I peered into the half-gloom, but did not see him. I took a step or two toward the door and called him. I stepped to the door and opened it, letting in the chill

dusk of mid-day in that latitude. The dog was not there and, certain that he could be found when wanted, I closed the door and resumed my place, feeling, rather than expressing, the loneliness of any spot where Miss Wilton was not visible. The quiet conversation dragged along for ten minutes, with its regularity of silence broken only by the puffing sound. The little clock up over Cavanaugh's pine desk ticked so loudly that it sounded explosive in its punctuated violence. The scratching of Cavanaugh's pencil seemed boisterous, as he scrawled over a list of supplies that would be wanted in the distant spring. So still was it that we could hear through the thick cabin walls and the plank door the crunching sound of a man's feet as he approached the trading post. Just outside the door we heard his voice.

"Get out of the way!" he commanded, and coupled his order with an oath.

Almost immediately following this we heard the impact of a foot, a dog's yell of pain and anger, followed by a fierce, snarling growl. I ran to the door, for it seemed to me there was something familiar in that animal outcry. I threw it open, and was just in time to see Sparhawk fighting off Malicula, whom he had evidently kicked. The man was kicking savagely

and tugging at a pistol which had got entangled in the folds of his denim parka. I lost no time in jumping out between him and the beast, and commanding the latter to lie down. Reluctantly Malicula ceased his attack, but stood with his wolf ruff raised, his eyes gleaming like twin coals of fire, and his big fangs exposed between snarling lips.

“Look out, Tom!” someone in the doorway shouted, and I whirled toward Sparhawk, instinctively feeling that from behind me some sort of attack threatened. The adventurer had liberated his gun and was jumping sideways to get a fair shot at my dog.

I had not time to shout a warning. All I could do was to lunge at him. There was scarcely three feet between us, and even in that short space, just as I caught his wrist and jerked it upward, the gun was discharged. I clung to him, but he, enraged, threatened me.

“Just hold on a moment!” I demanded. “I’ll attend to my dog! You’ve no occasion to shoot, or to spill any more of your temper!”

Even then I would have released my hold on his wrist, but sensed, from its tensivity and his unceasing struggle to free himself, that did I do so he might shoot either me or the dog, as his rage directed. I was not quite as tall as Spar-

180 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

hawk, nor nearly so heavy; but I had the advantage of clean living while he was still suffering from alcoholism. Moreover, all my youth had been passed in athletic exercises, and, I say it without boasting, I was no mean amateur. Hence, there was not a trick of hands or feet in self-defense or aggression of which I was not a fair master. Once, in my college days, I had been a devotee of jiu-jitsu, and now, for the first and only time in my life, I was driven to use it to quell and disarm the infuriated Sparhawk. I threw my right knee sharply against the inside of his left, and had he not given ground would certainly have broken his leg. At the same time I gave the wrist holding the pistol a sharp wrench. The hand suddenly relaxed, and the gun went flying through the air and into the trampled snow in front of the post. One of the men who had crowded through the doorway ran and picked it up, evidently fearing that Sparhawk would recover it and turn the brawl into an encounter of human tragedy. Sparhawk hesitated, breathed heavily, and took a step toward me with his heavy fists clenched.

“Hold on!” I commanded him. “Just try to cool off a little! There’s no use in our fighting over nothing.”

He stopped, but appeared to gain more anger. Still I tried to avoid a continuation of the quarrel, for I wanted it not.

“That dog would never have jumped you unless you did something to him, Sparhawk,” I went on. “You kicked him. I’m sure of that. We heard it there on the inside. You had no business to do that. You’re no chechahco. You know the rules of this country, and that one man never kicks another’s dog if it can be helped.”

He did not answer quickly enough to suit me, and I fear, on thinking it over, that I was hasty, or heated; for I added, “Anyhow, I’ll not permit any man living to kick that dog—and that goes for all it is worth!”

Before I could even plant myself Sparhawk struck at me. I was barely in time to duck the huge fist that came smashing toward my face. Almost from under my feet something gray shot forward with such force that Sparhawk, taken by surprise, was thrown backward into the snow. *Malicula* had come to my defense, and now lunged furiously, with a wolf cry, for the prostrated man’s throat. I was barely in time to prevent him from setting his fangs, and thus saving my antagonist’s life! for I am convinced that once he had gained his hold, *Malicula* would

have torn the prospector's throat wide with one sweeping, cutting gnash.

I caught the dog, and with difficulty restrained him, for he struggled to get loose and threatened to attack me in order to regain his liberty. I picked him up and threw him bodily inside the trading post, and someone, Cavanaugh, I think, slammed the door shut. I started back to try to argue with Sparhawk for a peaceable conclusion of the incident; but even as I turned he struck me, so quickly had he regained his feet. He rushed to kick me as I fell back into the snow. The men in front of the post seized him and held him. There were shouts of "Fair play, there! Fair play! None of that!" and his oaths and threats as he struggled to release himself.

I got to my feet. I was not stunned, nor seriously hurt; but all the anger I had restrained had climbed to the heated point, and I resolved to fight it out with the adventurer then and there, and have a definite end to this quarrel.

"Let go of him!" I shouted. "I can take care of myself. If he's so anxious to fight, give him his chance."

In every primitive country where the elemental is liberated, there are some men who

enjoy a fight, whose blood runs faster in the presence of a fray. One of these shouted, " Hold on a minute till I see if he's got another gun or a knife," and ran his hands under Sparhawk's clothing.

I hastily stripped off my parka. In the same interest for fair play they pulled Sparhawk's outer covering over his head, and jumped back out of the way. For the first time the adventurer appeared to believe that this might prove a serious business, and so he did not rush as I had expected, but deliberately rolled his sleeves up, exposing great, hairy arms, formidable and dangerous. His immense chest was half exposed where, in removing his parka, the men had partially unbuttoned his shirt. He grinned wickedly, and promised to kill me with his hands inside the coming five minutes. I said nothing, but waited for him to advance.

We could not have asked for a better ring, for there was a spot around the front of the post where the snow was beaten to a level, but was not glassy. I felt excellent footing beneath my moccasins, and also noted that Sparhawk was at a certain disadvantage in the fact that he was wearing heavy boots, donned, doubtless, while loafing around the camp. I had no fear whatever of the outcome; but I was not ren-

dered cooler by the coarse, obscene insults he showered on me, my parentage, and my class. I took tally of them, determined that for each spoken word he should pay. I had not long to wait.

On the instant when his sleeves were rolled to his satisfaction, Sparhawk sprang at me with surprising agility for a man of his bulk. I was hard put to it to defend myself for a full minute and a half, as he slammed blow after blow toward me, and rushed continually. I found need for all my footwork, as I worked round and round that circle of trampled snow, Nature's ring for our meeting. Once I almost ducked into a blow and felt it graze the side of my head. Once he landed, fortunately short, on my shoulder; but with sufficient force to half turn me round. Had he been an expert boxer, Sparhawk could then and there have ended the struggle, for I nearly lost footing and exposed a clean opening. Before he could take advantage of his luck, skill, or whatever one may call it, I had danced back out of his way and was again on guard.

The adventurer fought with both hands, and surprised me with his crude knowledge, doubtless gained in many a rough-and-tumble encounter on the sea coast of the Pacific where,

in early days, men fought for the mere excitement of it on the slightest pretext. I began to regain my temper and grow more cautious, for I realized that I was fighting an exceedingly dangerous man. He proved resourceful when he discovered that he could not break through my defense, and, with unexpected quickness, changed his tactics. He pushed forward with a feint as if to strike, and then lunged in for a grapple. Once in the clasp of those terrible arms I would have been lost, for he could have crushed me with that energetic brute strength so ably at his command. I barely avoided him, and for the first time lashed out.

The blow was well-timed, but not close enough to do more than check him. He was surprised at its quickness, and hesitated. I was in on him again, this time driving my fists into his face, fighting free-handed with both hands, disdaining a feint, and striking so fast that he was driven into the unpacked snow, where his impeded feet caught him, and he toppled backward to a sitting position.

I waited for him to rise, and the crowd, plainly sympathizing with me, cheered me wildly. Sparhawk, with a badly bruised face, scrambled to his feet, and enraged by the crowd's jeering, rushed toward me to renew the

battle. I saw that he was breathing heavily, and knew that my time had come. I sprang to meet him, and in a whirlwind of arms and fists struck, got away, struck again, side-stepped, and caught him full on the jaw. Even then, so great was his bulk and power, he merely staggered and smothered, deftly, his head from a second and more disastrous blow. Time and again as he lowered his hands I struck him on that weak spot, but never did I seem able to do more than weaken him. The crowd was wild with excitement now, and vaguely I realized, rather than saw, that from both directions in the street men were running toward us over the beaten trail. They shouted as they came. The whole camp was excited. It seemed to aggravate Sparhawk to a greater effort, and he made the serious mistake of lowering his defense and endeavoring to give and take, thus hoping to beat me down before his waning strength gave out. Had he played into my hands with purpose, he could have done no better, for now he was completely at my mercy. Ah, I was taking toll for his insults! I had hoped for a blow for each word; but I was enjoying twofold my count.

My own breathing was becoming heavy, my legs seemed to lack spring, my arms force.

Desperately I crowded the battle to the utmost. My head swam, my heart was bursting with the strain, and I knew that I must finish then and there, or rest. I gathered all my reserve strength even as he tried to seize me, blindly, for his eyes were almost closed, and then at last I put home the blow that counted! Sparhawk's arms suddenly swung wide, his fists unclenched, he reeled on his feet, pivoted, took two or three aimless, quaking steps forward, and fell on his face in the snow, where he lay, unconscious and inert.

Panting, and for the first time noting all around me, I stood above him. The crowd, applauding and gratified, was abruptly burst on one side, and the circle seemed to weave and open with the charge of someone behind. Into its edge broke Royce, his face red and inflamed, his lips voicing curses, and his whole appearance that of evil unleashed.

Before I could comprehend he jumped across and struck at me. The blow landed on my chest, and I was thrown backward against the nearest men. Some of them started to seize him, and then there came a curious lull.

Straight up under Royce's chin a heavy Colt's pistol was thrust, and he drew back as if in surprise and terror. Between me and him

stepped Dan, and the latter's face, swaddled as it was, showed all intent and purpose to kill. A peculiar and potent hush seemed to have paralyzed everyone, Royce included. And in that hush Dan's mumbled words sounded loud and resolute.

"You make one more move at Tom," declared his voice, steadily, and fraught with a deadly earnestness, "and I'll kill you before you can breathe twice. I've a notion to do it anyhow, just on general principles. Go over there and pick your partner up!"

With his free hand he motioned at the inert Sparhawk, who lay at our feet as if merely tired of strife and resting peacefully there on the trampled snow.

"Yes, and if you want to kill him," asserted the cold voice of Cavanaugh from the doorway, "I'll guarantee that the boys here won't hang you! Dan, it's up to you. The fight was fair. Sparhawk had the advantage of size. He was fairly whipped. This camp is already sick of him and his partner. If you want to, you can kill him. If you don't want to do that, the boys will join me in putting the pair of them out of Neucloviat!"

Even then I wondered at the trader's pronounced enmity; but he had chosen the psycho-

logical moment as far as the crowd was concerned. They were with me, thank Heaven! to a man. Royce looked around that ring of encircling, hostile faces. Nowhere did he meet any expression but a scowl. He knew that he had gone too far. The fumes of liquor cleared from his head. He looked down at Sparhawk, hesitated for a moment, and proved his diplomacy as abruptly as he had proved tactless. He stepped straight toward me, disregarding my partner's quick aiming of the weapon, and held out his hand.

"Young fellow," he said, "I'm sorry I did that! But when a man sees his pardner down and out and another standin' over him, he don't always stop to think. Here, shake, will you?"

I saved them an exile, I am convinced; for I accepted his hand, glad to have an end to it all. I turned to the men around and said, "Boys, it's just a mistake—the whole thing. Let it drop, if you want to please me. Here! Come on and let's get Sparhawk up and inside."

It was not necessary for me to assist in carrying my defeated antagonist into the warmth of the post, so quick is the shifting sentiment of a crowd. And now, looking back over it all, I am not sorry that in my moment of triumph I showed generosity. It was all

confused for a time, the close throng in the post, the adventurer spread out on a counter and reviving under the application of brandy precious to the trader, the congratulations of those who had watched the fight, the growling censure of Royce, the warm tongue of Malicula licking my bruised fists.

There was something good in Sparhawk, in some ways, rough as he was; for when he sat up beside the stove and met my eyes, he grinned feebly, and said, "There ain't no use in my pretendin' to like you, because I don't! You and me ain't through yet; but this much I want to say! You're a game man, and you fight clean and fair. I did kick your dog. And that's the one thing I done that wasn't on the level. Only remember this! No man ever yet took a fall out of me—Rip Sparhawk—without havin' to do it more'n once, so we ain't quits yet, my laddie buck, and you'll find it out before the trail ends!"

I rather liked him for that fearless declaration. Whipped as he was he would not condescend to lie or to conceal his animosity. He had put me on my guard, and I was given fair warning to watch for danger signals in the future.

"Just as you please," I said, as Dan tugged

at my arm and led me away from the post and out up the clean white trail.

"You're all right, are you, Tom?" he said, halting just before we reached the doctor's cabin, and looking at me with affectionate solicitude.

I assured him that I was, save for bruised hands, a bruised shoulder, and a sore chest.

"Lord!" he mumbled gleefully. "But that was some fight! Once or twice I thought I'd have to help; but then I knew how sore you would be if I did, so I just had to grit my hurt teeth and watch while you laced him to the finish. Oh, Pard! It was a glorious fight!"

He tried to smile at me through his swollen lips, and put his kindly hand on my shoulder. I forgot my own affairs as I looked at him.

"Does it hurt?" I asked irrelevantly, motioning at his tooth.

"Not so much," he mumbled.

"But it will be worse unless you keep in out of the cold," asserted a voice behind us, and we turned to see the doctor standing in his doorway. "Tom," he went on, "you may as well reconcile yourself to the loss of your partner for four or five days—maybe a week. He can sleep here in our cabin. Coleman's away on the gulch now, and he can have his

bunk. But both of you come in here now and get out of the air."

We obeyed, and the doctor, after listening to Dan's recountal of my meeting with Sparhawk, gave me arnica for my hurt hands, and much advice. We enjoyed his hospitality, although I sat brooding over the misfortune of my battle, thinking of how brutal a figure I must seem to Bessie Wilton when she heard that I had stood up in the snow and beaten a man to insensibility. Again I was eager to leave the camp.

I stood up to make my announcement, and shouted to Malicula, who was scratching at the door as if to warn me that the short day was spent, and dim and lonely night slipping stealthily over camp and trail.

"Don't you worry about the work, old man," I said to my partner, reaching for my parka, which hung on the peg near at hand. "I'll go back to the claim. I'll keep on drifting and sinking, and will dump the waste back into the drifts we know are no good. Maybe I'll have the pay streak by the time you come out. You just stay here until you are good and well, and then we shall tear the earth wide open up there. You remember I wanted you to come down here and rest in the first place."

The doctor applauded my decision, and Dan

reluctantly surrendered. He broke orders and came out to see me depart, as the dog team whined and barked before the door. I leaped into the sled, and we started out over the smooth trail. I looked back to see him still standing there, muffled and watching me. I waved my hand in response to his parting salute, and did not realize, so dull is prescience, that I was to suffer as men rarely suffer before I should again feel the clasp of his sturdy and faithful hand.

CHAPTER XIII

WE TAKE TO THE TRAIL

THE cabin seemed lonely when I opened its creaking door on the night of my lonely return. I had not appreciated how much the companionship of Dan meant to me in those peaceful days of work and hope. The supper was tasteless without companionship. The wind moaned through the gulch with a more lonely note, and the peaks bordering it seemed higher, more aloof, and more chill. The bunk was less comforting after the light had been extinguished, and the blackness settled down. I awoke to work alone, and the day passed again, in loneliness.

In the Far Northern country, in the depressing days of winter, there is something in being isolated, when one is despondent, that augments all one's melancholy. Not a living thing had been up, down, or around me all day. The dogs felt my mood, and were not companionable. Even the "camp robber," or Canadian blue jay, that sometimes favored me with his

presence, had vanished, and I was left alone to brood.

Nor am I ashamed to say that the face of Elizabeth Wilton was in my memory most of the hours, and that she appeared as an unattainable apparition, a source of bitter regret. Life summed itself in this, that I was to go hungry for love, and that all I could hope for was money, a paltry success. And of that there was none in sight, for our claim was still a discouraging blank.

I sometimes fancy that the drunkard, or drinking man, has his recompense; for when I sat alone in my cabin that long winter evening, I thought that I should welcome the oblivion of bestial drunkenness! Anything to forget!

Of Sparhawk I thought but little, save now and then when I remembered, with some brutal satisfaction, that I was his master, and that he must know it; but on the second day I was reminded of it in an unexpected manner.

I had found something that looked like pay dirt, and was laboriously climbing the ladder to hoist a bucket, sliding it out on the pay dump, lowering the bucket and sliding down the rope to refill it, making but slow progress. It was while I was on top, just after I had dumped the half-barrel over the end of the skids, when I

was aware of voices in the bed of the frozen stream below. Naturally I paused to listen; for in a land where monotony rules, the slightest change becomes a welcome interruption. Coming around the bend of the creek I saw two men, without dogs, plodding heavily upward and looking at their surroundings as if they were making an excursion into a strange land.

“That’s him,” I heard one of them say, halting below our dump.

The other man came up abreast and looked up. I did not know them with all that silvery halo of fox tail, and frost, around their parka hoods.

“Come on!” said the speaker. “Let’s go up and see him.”

“What for?” I heard, and then a mumbled conversation, which, though sound travels as if oiled in that infinite stillness, did not reach me in audible sentences.

“Because I want you to!” was the gruff reply, and it seemed to me there was something familiar in that tone.

They left the main trail, and began floundering toward me, the snow impeding their advance; but I waited, knowing that they were coming to talk to me. The foremost man

plowed through with a bent head, and the one immediately behind did not seem familiar. It was him I noted; also that he came reluctantly, as if impelled by the stronger will of his companion to advance. The foremost man came to where the red dirt of the pay dump gleamed vividly against the snow, and scrambled up, still with bent head. Once he had to use his hands, so steep was the ascent of that little mountain of poor paying dirt. He caught the end of the birch skids with his hands, swung around them, made a final heavy effort, and stood beside me. It was Sparhawk.

I drew back a trifle, not knowing what to expect, and apprehensive of combat with two such men against me. I glanced up and down the creek to see if there was any other man in sight to aid me in case this visit preceded an attack. There was no one to assist me. I stifled an impulse to turn and run toward my cabin to seize a rifle, and looked at Sparhawk, who stood there before me, watching Royce, for he it was, scale the steep dump.

"I made him come up here to thank you," Sparhawk said, with gruff directness.

I must have looked my relief and bewilderment.

"Oh, no. I didn't come here to fight," as-

serted the prospector, appearing to read my thoughts. "A square deal's a square deal! You and me, pussonally, ain't quits yet. You know that! We've got to have it out to a finish before we are; but I hand this to you, that I ain't the kind that shoots in the back. You'll know when I come after you for a final smash-up and throw-out."

In all this time I had not spoken to him, nor extended my hand.

"I'm glad that's your way of having it out," I said. "I don't like to feel all the time that I've got to be on guard; but I can be if I have to."

He grinned through his blackened and swollen lips as if this were a sentiment that he could appreciate.

"I fight fair, myself," he said. "So do you. Credit where credit's due, as the old motto says. That's why we stopped here on our way up the gulch. That's what I said to Royce when we did stop. 'Royce,' says I, 'there's that young hellion. Me and you owe him somethin'.' That somethin' is thanks for headin' off the mob down there at Cavanaugh's when they were ripe to hang us, or, worse, to run us out of Neucloviat. He's come to thank you, has Royce."

Royce stood and scowled at me. He was not the man that Sparhawk was. I am certain that he did not share his virtues, such as they were. He scraped his feet on the running board, and his frozen moccasins sounded harsh and fickle as he shifted them around.

“Sparhawk says I orter thank you,” he declared. “I ain’t nothin’ agin’ you; but I’ll get that pardner of yours the next time he tries a gun play on me. I’ve killed men for——”

Suddenly he checked himself as if his speech had run away with his desire for secrecy, to his regret.

“What I meant to say,” he corrected himself, “is that I could have shot a man for less than he did to me. He had the drop on me. I didn’t go for to expect it. You tell him to keep that gun of his in his holster if he don’t want to use it.”

“Oh, shut up!” growled Sparhawk, reaching out and jerking his partner’s arm. “That ain’t what I brung you here for. Play the game, man! Play the game! Try to show a little decency when it don’t cost nothin’.”

Royce frowned at his partner, then, as if governed by caution and advice, looked me full in the face.

“You did keep us from havin’ a rough time

of it," he said, with the emphasis on the word "did," "and I ain't altogether ongrateful. It would have been kind of tough lines for us to be run out of the camp just now. You said the right words at the right time, and Sparhawk says I orter thank you. I do. Yours and his row's your own. Mine and your pardner's is ours. The two don't mix none at all. But for you and me, I thank you for not takin' advantage of your chance. Maybe you're a fool. I don't know. Anyhow you did."

His half-incoherent, jumbled, illiterate words, were delivered steadily.

"Pshaw!" I declared. "I couldn't have done anything less. I had no row with you. I didn't want one with your partner. I have nothing against Sparhawk—now. He kicked my dog. I fight for that dog. It's all over now. I'm not afraid, mark you, of either of you; but I don't cherish grudges. It's all over, as far as I'm concerned, and I wish you both luck."

Sparhawk eyed me steadily as if thoroughly comprehending all I meant, then did another amazing thing. He jerked the mitten from his hand and extended it, bare, toward me.

"That's just the way I look at it," he declared. "Shake! I ain't got nothin' in the

world against you either, except that you got the best of it. You and me'll be friends."

I shook his hand for the second time.

"But you and me'll fight again, whenever it's convenient," he added, "just to be sure which is the best man. I cain't allow no man to get the best of Rip Sparhawk on just one fight. They won't be no pussonal grudge—just a clean fight—like we had yesterday. And I want to tell you, young feller, that I'll come as near to beatin' you to death as I can! I will, so help me God!"

With which declaration he replaced his mitten, asked how the claim was showing up, said he thought it was a nice day for the trail, hoped I would meet with success, and said, "Come on, Royce. We got to be movin' up the gulch if we want to see it to-day," and led the way downward over the dump. I confess the interview left me with mingled emotions, for I felt that I could trust to a sort of crude honor in the adventurer, and was therefore relieved, and at the same time was apprehensive for Dan. I would not have placed it above Royce's code of ethics to shoot a man in the back. And I did not want Dan shot, either in the back or otherwise.

I thought of that interview all through the

day until the lonely night again found me listlessly dawdling around our cabin.

I could not interest myself in the book loaned me by Cavanaugh, and blew out my light and went to bed. Sleep came quickly as a boon. I was awakened by a terrific thumping at the door.

"Come in," I called, sitting up, and wondering who it could be, and how long I had slept.

It opened, and outlined against the stars of the background stood someone, who answered: "Is that you, Tom?"

"Yes, Kentuck," I replied, recognizing his voice. "Light the candle. You know where it is. What is it?"

"They've gone," he said. "It must be that I didn't quite understand the time set. The Big Chicken and the Hatchet, I mean. Constantine and she had a row down at the camp to-day, and he came home alone. To-night one of the natives from across the river came up to a claim above, and stopped to tell Constantine that she had sent word she was going with friends to visit some relatives in Taninaw. Constantine went into a rage, and reckoned she could go and be hanged, for all of him; but I knew better than he did what it meant.

“ If we’re to take a try at finding where they’ve headed for, and get in and stake some of that gold they all talk about, we’ve got to get action to-night. We could cut across from here, and get to Taninaw not more than a day behind them. We’d save the time of going around the camp there by going to that little stream above it, direct. And there we ought to find their trail. I hate to lose the chance. It means a lot to me. Won’t you come with me? ”

I had crawled out of my bunk as he talked, and pulled on my trousers, and sat there on the edge thinking. He wanted to go to gain wealth to marry Elizabeth Wilton, the girl I loved. I knew that, and yet it influenced my decision but little. The glamor of gain was not all, either, but rather the fact that I was sick of life as it had been, and also that there was Dan to consider. Poor old Dan, with his cares and worries, eating his heart out because he could not take care of those others outside! And Dan was all man. If by chance I could make this expedition, and meet with success, it would mean more to Dan than anything in the world. But there were the discomforts and fatigues of what might prove to be a long, hard trail, vicissitudes, perhaps starvation and death!

I walked to the door and threw it open, and looked out into the night, while Kentuck sat watching me, anxiously waiting for my decision. Off in the north the aurora was beginning to rise above the trees on the crest of the mountains, shining in streamers of gold, fluttering, waving, and spreading across to consume the sky. The cold was so intense that I hurriedly drew back, and closed the door, and stood with my back against it, looking at Kentuck. The bunk was warm and comfortable, after all; but to lie soft meant an opportunity lost. The reckless mood invaded me again, and I took a step toward him.

“ Yes,” I said. “ I’ll go! ”

He threw his hat up, and shouted.

“ Go out and pull the sled down off the roof,” I said, “ and look over the dog harness you’ll find hanging in the cache at the side of the door. Then we’ll get the grub together, put the dogs in, and pull out. What time does it say there on the clock? Ten? Well, we should be away from here by eleven, and the moon rises just about that time, and is in the full.”

I began selecting the clothing I should want, extra moccasins, and mittens and socks, and dragged the fur robe from the bottom layer in my bunk. I had begun to wrap the bacon and

beans and oatmeal into their separate sacks by the time he had finished his last repairs on the harness. I took my snowshoes from the wall, and threw Dan's to Kentuck, and told him to look at the lashings, then sat down and wrote a note to my partner:

DEAR DAN:—The Sioux and the girl have pulled out, and Kentuck and I are going to try to follow them and stake claims on that ground, wherever it may be. Don't worry over me, because I'll turn up sooner or later. Get someone to do that assessment work that Kentucky started over on McGraw's claim, and whatever you do, don't let anyone know where we have gone. Better let them think we've headed up to Goldpan to do some assessment work, because I think we'll be back shortly. I've taken your rifle and cartridges, because mine are too heavy. We're traveling light. Yours as ever,

TOM.

We dragged the old tarpaulin for the sled out of the cache, threw in the little trail tent and trail stove, the frying pan, coffeepot, and tin kettle, and I put in an extra pair of blankets and some dry gear for Kentuck, then we lashed everything down on the sled with the dog fish piled on top, the ax and the rifle convenient, and shut the cabin door.

The dogs came reluctantly, poor brutes! They gave the trail bark of the wilderness when they felt the harness bands across their breasts, and stood wagging their tails and waiting. I

took a last look in the cabin, and pulled the door shut, and we headed away in the chill, bright night, down the cañon, which was in shadow, despite the moon on the white peaks above.

We were off on the quest, and traveled silently and swiftly away. Where the small creek emptied we turned abruptly up the main stream from whose headwaters we purposed to cross the divide, and head the fugitive Sioux and Mary, who had the secret, passed down from mouth to mouth,—mouths all forever speechless in death.

We were lighter than we had thought, and made good progress, inasmuch as Kentuck knew the way, and ran ahead of the dogs on his snowshoes without ever wavering, while I held the sled handles behind. Malicula, the leader, strained forward as if enjoying the chase, and scenting in it something of the hereditary, for he was, after all, but a half-blood wolf. The others, with brushes erect, and curled over their backs, strung out behind him, trotting steadily at a pace that ate up the miles. At three o'clock we halted, and decided to make a quick camp for the night at a place where some native hunting party had left a comfortable wickie with its poles between three favorable trees,

its lean-to of thick, sheltering brush, and its mat of fir boughs inside to give rest to our weariness.

We altered our plans the next day, and decided to go into Taninaw, because we found that we would be short of dog fish and food, if the chase proved prolonged, and on the dogs depended our comfort and speed. Moreover, I was anxious to know if we would hear anything of our quarry at that point. So it was that we pulled up to the old A. C. trading post, and carelessly laid in more supplies before making inquiries. The trader proved garrulous, and volunteered the information we wanted, thus saving us questions.

"You're the first white men down from Neucloviat in quite a while," he said. "Yes, the first since poor old Sam Barstow came down. What's that the natives say about him bein' dead? Right, is it?"

I confirmed that mysterious interchange of news which travels so incredibly fast in Alaska, and the trader shook his head. As he weighed out our dog fish he asked questions about the camp, and whether it was "makin' good" or not, and we answered him noncommittally.

"They was a funny-lookin' buck with a tin tooth in here yesterday I never saw before," he

said, "and he told me the camp wa'n't much. He had that Mary, who used to be down at Holy Cross, with him. The big *klootch* that was old Sarta's daughter. They were headin' off up the Taninaw on a huntin' trip. He laid in quite a bunch of dog feed. Seemed to have the dust, and, by the way, it was the funniest lookin' stuff I ever saw. Looked as if it had been hammered. I wouldn't have took it if it hadn't been the same kind that Sam paid for the stuff he bought down here. It don't look like the gold from Birch, any more than that does like the brassy stuff they git out at Klondike. Here's some of it."

He poured some beaten nuggets into the blower, and held them toward us. I picked one up, and looked at it. It was that peculiar red, and I knew it had been perforated. Mary had torn it from the moccasins of gold to pay their bill. The proof was there in my hand that the Hatchet and Constantine's sister had really been there at the post, and that Kentuck must have understood much of what they said.

"When did you say they were here?" I asked.

The trader thought a while, and then said that it was "day before yistaday."

His answer caused Kentuck and me to exchange glances. They were traveling faster than we had thought they could. We must do something to improve our speed. But it would not do to show that we had any special object.

"We're thinking of going over to Tramway Bar, or in that direction," I said, "and we ought to have more dogs. We've got four, but we could use six or eight. Know of any?"

He ruminated for a while, and then said he thought he could help us out. This necessitated more dog feed, and a delay. We went over our outfit, ounce by ounce, cutting down here and increasing there, as only those who have traveled in that country where weight is measured by ounces rather than pounds, can understand. And it was two o'clock in the afternoon when, with everything complete, and three additional dogs, we pulled away from Taninaw, crossed, found, and headed for the small stream up which we were to go.

We had not discovered any sign of their trail when we made camp that night, and, the next morning at daybreak, we were again on the way. At noon we were beginning to lose faith, but we discovered lines leading down to the bed of the creek. We went ahead of the dogs, and examined them carefully. The snow told the

story. It was the Sioux and a squaw. The lines of the man's feet were straight, with the toes a little turned in, and one foot planted squarely in front of the other, the unquestionable stride of the plains Indian, while the woman's footprints showed spread, and small, and rounded, the footprint of the Alaskan native.

"Got 'em!" said Kentucky, straightening himself, and looking at me with exultant eyes.

I stooped over, and examined the snow, trying to form some conclusion of the number of their dogs, and how long they had preceded us along that winding, white way. It seemed to us that they were fully twenty-four hours ahead, and we resumed our progress. The new dogs were ill fed compared with ours, and were reluctant to work with their new teammates, and afraid of their new masters. They traveled with heads turned back frequently, and fearful eyes, which led me to believe that their former owners had been free with the lash. It would take them time to appreciate white drivers. Kentucky, who was in the lead, threw up his hand, and we came to a place where the Hatchet and Mary had evidently halted for tea.

"Had a fire over there, you see," said Kentucky, striding off to the side, with me at his

heels. We found round spots on the snow, indicating that they had five dogs, so felt safe on the score of speed, unless they had remarkable animals. We doubted if they would prove equal to ours, for of these, two were from splendid racing stock.

"Yes," I said, kicking over the charred sticks, "they must be at least twenty-four hours ahead of us, so we needn't be afraid of running into them. That is good. Now for a long straightaway!"

For three hours more we went rapidly ahead, and then, as I happened to be in the lead, I met with a surprise. Again we stopped, and Kentucky came forward to my side. I pointed at the snow tracks. Another sled had come down from the bank above, taken the trail, and was following in the tracks of the Sioux and his companion.

"What do you suppose that means?" we asked each other, looking up with a sudden suspicion.

"You don't reckon somebody else is onto them, and joined in the chase, do you?" asked Kentucky, in a tone of annoyance.

I shook my head in perplexity, and backtracked over the new trail. It had followed along the bank above for some distance, as if

afraid to venture out on the stream until certain that those ahead were well out of the way, and its progress had been leisurely. We went back some distance, and found where the newcomers had paused to rest, or observe, and here the signs were more plentiful.

"White men," said Kentuck. "See the arches of their feet? Here!"

I was not so sure, for the moccasins made it hard reading; but there were certain lines beneath the insteps that indicated less pressure, and in one place I thought I could discern seams which would indicate that the moccasins were really Canadian shoe packs, all of which must be brought down from Dawson when they came to our section of the country, and were therefore rare.

We found a cigarette stub, which rather confirmed our surmise that they must be white men, for the paper was different from that used by the natives where we were, and unobtainable either in Taninaw or Neucloviat.

I crumbled some of the tobacco into my palm, and decided it was the old, familiar blackstrap, which told us nothing; but of one feature we were convinced—the new outfit was probably but a few hours behind the one in the lead, and was going with caution.

We turned back toward the bank, and I heard Kentuck give a sudden sharp yell: "Here! Come back here!" and then a whistle.

I ran to rejoin him, but he had started out on the trail, and I looked below. At that point the stream was straight for a long distance, and I saw, almost at the end of the stretch, a black shape hurrying faster as the sound of Kentuck's voice reached his ears. One of our new dogs had chewed himself loose from his harness in our absence, and was heading back for his village, a full day behind. It was our first loss, and it seemed like a calamity, coming at that inopportune time.

I was a more experienced dog man than Kentucky, so left him with the sled, and ran after the fugitive for more than two miles, calling wheedlingly, and endeavoring to win his attention; but whenever I approached he would look back over his shoulder, and quicken his trot to the long, swinging lope that would speedily carry him hundreds of yards into the lead, and at last, disgusted and angry, I gave it up, and made my way back to where Kentucky, deciding that I would be gone a long time, had begun making camp on the river bank. Already he had the tent across its rope between the trees, and pegged down over the smooth,

white snow, and when I arrived was carrying the dunnage up to it.

“ Too fast for you, eh? ” he called down to me. “ I was afraid of it. But we’ll get along.”

There was optimism in his voice, and I was compelled to try to feel it. The darkness was coming swiftly, and by the time I had taken out the dogs, and as a precautionary measure chained the other new purchases, it was black. Everything about the day had been unsatisfactory, and those ahead of us must have gained many miles. All we could hope for now would be steady weather, so that their trails might not be obliterated.

“ Don’t be blue,” Kentuck said to me as his last words, yawning sleepily. “ These new fellers maybe aren’t followin’ that other trail at all, but just happened to be goin’ the same way.”

I hoped so, but doubted it.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HATCHET'S VENGEANCE

BEFORE the daylight was strong we had broken camp, and were again going forward, and always we could discern, in the dim light, that there were two trails ahead of us. The stars paled at last, and the white glow was stronger, making everything distinct. My fears that the second sled was in pursuit of the first were proven, now that we could see more plainly; for at intervals, when we came to abrupt bends of the rapidly narrowing stream, we would find those distinct letterings in the snow that told that before the pursuers had ventured around a bend one of them had walked cautiously to the outer edge and looked ahead. It was certain that they were closer to the Hatchet than we were to them, and that they feared to surprise him.

We began to admit that we were not alone in the chase, and had the sense of lively speculation as to who these others were, and how they had learned of the flight. Only, as the

trail led on and on, we were not certain whether the footmarks were those of natives or white men.

"Maybe it is Constantine," I said once to Kentucky. "Perhaps he is following his sister, and proposes to bring her back."

"Might be," answered Kentucky. "He's an odd sort of a stick. But if he followed, it wouldn't be to bring the Hatchet back! You can bet on that. The Hatchet would be left on the trail for good and all. That Constantine is a chap I wouldn't want for an enemy."

He stood for a while, and then exclaimed: "By jingo, Tom, I'll bet it is him! He's changed his mind, and he's made it up now to go after 'em. He can mush like the devil, Constantine can. I gathered some talk he handed her about some other native down in the village who wanted her, and was of her own tribe, and it may be that Mister Sioux-man has got a pair of bloodhounds on his trail, just waitin' till he gets far enough away to make it safe, and that then, some nice evening—Ping! Down he goes, with one of those H. B. slugs through him. Kicks a few, and—the Hatchet never comes back."

I began to think that possibly Kentuck's surmise might be right; but on the trail one has

time for many speculations and many thoughts. That is, I had as many as Kentucky would allow me, for of all the trail mates I had ever had, he was the most cheerful and unfailing. Those who know will bear me out when I say that an Alaskan trail is the place to learn men. There the soul is bared. In civilization a man may live forever under a mask, but the trail strips it from him as if it were of gauze, and he is himself, and those with him know that he is naked in soul and disposition.

That eminent sage of the frontier, long since dead, discoverer of Eldorado Creek, in Klondike, Elihu Whipple, was wont to say: "You kin tell what a man is when you've eat a sack of flour with him; but with some men it only takes a half a sack." And the diminishing sack with Kentucky Smith each day proved him more of a man than I had thought. He began to loom colossal with his untiring energy, his unfailing cheerfulness, his persistent attempt to do more than his share.

We had expected to overtake, or at least come within sound of, our quarry within two or three days, for we were driving the dogs to their utmost; but the two days passed, then stretched on into ten, with ever-recurring monotony. We had swung to the westward, and

crossed the Koyukuk far below where we knew there was an Indian village, and were now heading toward the northwest, with its piled-up hills, its bleak flats, its timber found only in belts. And ill luck appeared to travel with us, gauntly trailing beside our sled.

The second blow came when one of the new dogs sickened, until, abandoning hope for him, we had to put him out of his misery. We could not understand his malady, unless it came from overwork. The other dog followed him within a few days, and we began to fear that it was pneumonia. Each dog out of the harness meant, notwithstanding the constantly diminishing load, more wearisome labor.

We traveled longer hours, and slept less to offset that loss, still confident that sooner or later the long trail must end, and thanked Heaven that the cold was so intense, and the winter so still, that the trails ahead, constantly leading us farther into the solitudes, were not blinded.

Some days we thought we must have gained, then would come others when we were discouraged and surmised that we were losing in this tireless race. And always, ahead of us, were two trails. Added to this was another fear, that our food would give out. Already the

dogs had been reduced to half rations, and to their ravenous jaws were flung but a half fish a day, while we, too, were measuring each flake of oatmeal, and each scrap of bacon.

We lost another day, but on looking back I think it saved our lives. It was the day when the dogs refused to follow the trail, and gave the long, wolf-hunting cry, and we knew that game was somewhere within scent, coming down the wind. We took a chance, and muzzled them, and I left Kentucky to make camp and wait, while I passed off into that slow-moving breeze with nothing but my rifle. And, as if Heaven had spared us, I killed a moose. I made my way back to the camp, and we moved it to the new-sent relief, where we froze all of the meat that we could carry in strips, fed the dogs to repletion, and prepared to make up for lost distance with this surplus energy; but we had lost a day.

A day later, on the trail, we found a dead dog, waiting for the wolves, perhaps. And the next day another left to die in misery, staggering along, and calling to us, and humanity made us execute him. We had begun to fear starvation in that land of unreality, and Kentucky turned back and picked up the gaunt body.

220 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

“ I think,” he said, “ that we’d better tie him up in a tree somewhere.”

I looked into his eyes, and understood. He, too, had thought of the end, of what might be the distress of that homeward trail; but he was unflinching.

“ Maybe it is best to be on the safe side,” I replied, and we lashed the poor victim high up in the limbs of a tree, with a sacrificed piece of sled lashing, and went on, wondering whether that poor, worked-out body might not become our goal when other food was gone.

On the next day we trailed more dismally, for the cold had clung to our hearts, and we moved speechlessly, rested speechlessly, and were tired of peering ahead to see nothing but the two trails leading away over the white and cruel snow. We entered a belt of scrubby timber as the afternoon advanced, and now those persistent marks of two sleds wound in and out among trees, the heaviest growth we had seen for days.

Suddenly Malicula lifted his head, which had been drooping, and tugged at his harness, then gave a long wail, and plunged forward more recklessly. Alarmed, I ran back, and caught and stopped him.

“ We’re up to them, or else it’s a hunting party,” I said to Kentucky. “ Something’s in

the wind, and it must be a camp, or the dogs wouldn't act this way. I know them. Go on carefully, and see what it is, while I hold them."

I pulled them over until the brace under the nose of the sled was wedged against the stump of a fallen tree, and waited. The dogs quieted, and, glad of a chance to rest, lay down in their harnesses, with their noses on their paws, huddled together, regardless of snarls, and seeking one another's warmth. Almost an hour passed, and I was trudging backward and forward, and threshing my arms to keep my blood in circulation, when Kentucky returned.

"I cain't make it out," he said, with a serious face, and approaching close before he spoke, as if still fearful, in all that terrific waste, of being overheard. "There's a dog tent up ahead, and smoke coming from the pipe, and a man singing, as if he were about drunk. There ain't no dogs, because I went close enough to see that, and, besides, nothin' barked. Let's drive a little farther, then tie our dogs, and go and have a look."

"But what was the man singing?" I asked, puzzled by his story.

"Singin'? Oh, you mean the tune, or language? I don't know. I couldn't make out."

I thought for a few moments, and then made a resolution.

"We will go straight through," I said. "Because, if it's a hunting party, it's good for us—unless they are starving—our grub is running low. It can't be the Sioux, because he wouldn't sing. If it is Constantine, he would let us travel with him. We've nothing to lose, and everything to gain. Besides, it's about time to camp."

"Bully for you," answered Kentucky, with his usual cheerfulness. "Hey, get up there till we get this harness straightened out!" he addressed the dogs, as he stirred them from their rest.

They started forward again eagerly, with their noses in the air, and barking, as if smelling the smoke of a camp; but when we were closer to it Malicula suddenly began to slacken on his rope, and his ruff was raised, and he turned and looked at me, whining. Even as I started toward him he raised his white throat and broad, gray wolf head into the air, and sent forth a melancholy howl that sent shivers creeping up and down my spine.

"Now, what do you suppose made him do that?" Kentuck shouted, as the other dogs joined the wailing chorus.

"I'm afraid," I said, "that there's something wrong up there. Come back and take the handles."

I went forward, and patted the leader with a reassuring caress, and he looked up at me with his intelligent eyes, and followed when I spoke to him. The team straightened out, and the sled surged forward slowly, as I led the way. I came to an open spot across which the two white trails led, and saw, not more than a hundred feet away, in the gloom of the day, the squat shape of a prospector's tent thrown between two trees. The birches and firs stood there denuded, like an oasis on the borders of a far-flung spread of white beyond, leading up to a low hill. It was true that smoke was crawling laggardly upward, and a droning voice was wailing undistinguishable words. The dogs pulled back, and I urged them forward. The voice went on monotonously, and as I came closer I could hear nothing but a singsong, without language or meaning.

"Hello!" I shouted, to announce our coming, and listened. The singsong did not cease, but continued as steadily as before. I looked back at Kentuck, and we walked forward together, leaving the dogs huddled on the trail, with the nose of the sled wedged against the base

of a tree, so they could not overturn it or escape.

Again we called at the outside of the tent, but without eliciting response or cessation of the song. We opened the tent fly, which had been loosely lashed, and looked inside. Resting on his back beneath his blankets, and with his hands under his head, was a white man. We entered, and I looked down into his eyes. Apparently he was delirious, and perhaps dying.

"Don't you know who it is?" whispered Kentuck in my ear, as if fearing to stop that chant.

"Yes," I whispered back, my voice sounding loud and harsh in that stillness, broken only by the humming of the man in the blankets.

"It's Sparhawk, the feller we saw at Singer's dance," said Kentuck, not heeding my answer. "Somethin's the matter with him."

I leaned over, and called the adventurer by name, and after a time he stared back at me, became silent, and then rolled over on his side, and feebly put another small stick of wood into the stove, as if the habit of winter trails and camps had survived his reason—an automatic action instilled in men when life depends on heat. I took from my pocket my brandy flask, kept for emergencies only, and put it to his

lips. I had to drag it away from him, lest he empty it. It appeared to revive him. He rolled over to one elbow, and his eyes lost their strange, uncanny glare.

"Grub!" he said. "For God's sake give me somethin' to eat. I've lived on raw oatmeal—years—years and—— Where's Royce? Oh, yes, I recollect now. Who are you? Seems like I know you. You ain't——"

"I am the man you fought in front of the post," I said, speaking loudly, as if believing I must shout to make him understand. "What's the matter with you?"

He turned over again, and then fell back, as if exhausted, on his blankets, and asked for food, his reiterated "Grub! Grub!" sounding painfully insistent.

I looked around the little tent. It was littered everywhere in confusion, as if in his illness Sparhawk had rifled it, and stolen from himself. He had subsided now, and lay there with his eyes closed in a ghastly way, with the whites showing, as if physical strength were insufficient to close them.

I turned with Kentucky, and hurried outside. We took the lashings off the sled in haste, and I went back into the tent with a stew kettle and a strip of the precious frozen moose

meat in my hand. The wood was almost exhausted, and Sparhawk still lay with his eyes closed in that same half-dead way. I feared for an instant that he was dead, and leaned over to catch his faint breathing. He did not look like the strong man I had seen that night at the squaw dance. I wondered what could have brought him to this, for it scarcely seemed that starvation alone could have been so deadly. I feared that he was dying, and hastened my preparations, through which he slept in that same inert way.

I heard Kentuck having trouble with the dogs.

"Hang it all!" he said, "they're afraid of somethin'. What shall I do with 'em? Tie 'em up?"

"Yes," I called back softly, and heard him go about this task, then the ring of his ax as he felled a tree for fuel.

"Feed the dogs," I called, "and maybe they'll get over it. And give them a fish each to-night, so they'll feel better."

"Good medicine," I heard his response.

Then I aroused Sparhawk and poured the steaming broth down his throat as, with one hand behind his shoulders, I lifted him up. I gave him all I dared, then laid him back on the

blankets, and he again went to sleep. I went outside, and carried in our supplies, dropping to my knees inside the tent, hungry, and wondering. The dogs, too tired to utter further protest, and too happy to find such an abundant meal, were smelling around the snow for last fragments of frozen fish. Kentucky came in with the blankets, and whispered, as if fearing to arouse the sleeper: "What's he got to say?"

I shook my head, and threw the bacon in the pan, and stirred the flapjack batter, preparatory to making our bread supply. Kentucky sat there, staring at the recumbent Sparhawk for a time, then went out and filled the pan with snow, and put it where it could melt. I heard him pass outside, and go from dog to dog with a friendly word, as if they were still nervous, then wash his hands in snow torn from the bank around the foot of the tent. The candle, stuck in a crotched stick, flared brighter, and I poured the first batter in the frying pan, and watched it come to a brown before flipping and turning it.

Kentucky entered, and piled some of his newly cut wood over the tent fly to hold it down, and at my suggestive nod picked up the first pancake and strips of bacon, and rolled

them into a convenient handful. He ate solemnly and silently, staring thoughtfully at Sparhawk, who still slept. I lifted the Cœur d'Alener's head, and again held the broth to his lips. This time it was stronger; but he swallowed greedily, and then, without word or look, fell asleep.

We had finished our meal, seen to it that the dogs were asleep, and washed out our cooking utensils before Sparhawk awoke. Then he suddenly tried to sit up, and fell back, clutching his side. The strength of his delirium had deserted him, and he lay there staring at us, but with sane eyes.

"How did you get here?" he croaked feebly.

"Over the trail," Kentuck answered, with an assumption of cheerfulness.

Sparhawk appeared to be trying to remember.

"We're north, ain't we? A long ways from anywhere?"

"We are," I answered. "We've been following what we think must have been your trail."

Again he lay quiet for a moment, and then said: "And the Hatchet's?"

"I suppose so."

The pause was longer this time, and he ap-

peared to be thinking over something. I thought it best to give him more of the broth, which had now become thick and nourishing, and he weakly let me lift him up, and hold it to his lips. It seemed to strengthen him somewhat, and his eyes appeared more thoughtful.

"You know where he's headin' for, then?"

I nodded my head, as did Kentuck.

"Well, then you know that he's after the red gold. I've been—I've been goin' out for so long that I lost count of the days. I can't make it. Your and my fight ain't ever comin' off. Sorry for that! I'm a goner. I'm goin' to cash in. Maybe I'd best tell you how it happened. The Hatchet got me. Come over here and look."

He clawed with his emaciated hands at the blankets, and I pulled them down, to draw back, shocked. His whole shoulder was crudely swathed, but the stained bandages had fallen away, and been displaced in that instinctive effort to keep alive, maintained through his delirium, and a gaping wound was exposed, such as that made by a heavy, slow-moving bullet when its force has been almost expended. It led through the upper part of his lung, as nearly as I could judge, and was a frightful hole.

“ The Hatchet gave me that,” he said. “ No use tryin’ to fix it up! I’m a goner. Our fight’s not settled, and it ain’t worth while. You fought fair, you did! Just give me some more of that soup.”

Again I held the kettle to his lips, and he drained it greedily, feverishly. He would have talked then, but I made him keep quiet, and tried to dress his wound as best I might, although he constantly assured me that it was a useless ministration. But it had this effect, that he went to sleep, exhausted, before I had finished, and we laid out our blankets and did likewise, without his having said anything more. Only now and then, through the night, the dogs howled as if the air were filled with spirits of the dead.

CHAPTER XV

SPARHAWK FINISHES

“WHAT time is it now?”

Sparhawk's voice, feeble and hoarse, aroused us. It was not daylight, and I struck a match, and looked at my watch. It was nearly eight o'clock in the morning. I hastily crawled from my warm robe, and reached for the kindling, and thrust it into the little stove, and set fire to it. It was bitterly, biting cold, with that dead still cold that seems almost to stab.

“I didn't want you to get up on my account,” Sparhawk went on, in his labored voice, “but I jest wanted to know the time. I've been thinkin' a lot.”

“Well, suppose you try to go to sleep again,” I said. “It will be warmer in a minute or two, and I'll get that broth working, and wake you when it is good and hot.”

“No use,” he said; but, as if reassured by my friendly presence, and comforted by the warmth so quickly making the little tent com-

fortable, he was soon dozing, and I cautiously made preparations for breakfast.

Kentucky, after turning restlessly to get his face away from the light of the candle, began snoring. I went outside the tent, where the stars were still shining, and the dogs, as if tired by their night of restlessness, were now mere black spots in the holes which Kentuck had scooped for them in the snow. I did not arouse Kentuck until the breakfast was ready, for I surmised that we should be compelled to lay up here for mere humanity's sake, until Sparhawk was better, live, or dead. It was hard that we should have come so far to such an unfortunate end, spelling failure, probably; for to pass on in such a crisis as this, one must have a heart of stone. And the food! It was getting scarcer by so many pounds each day.

We finished our breakfast, and fed the dogs, and it was daylight before Sparhawk awoke. I gave him the steaming broth again, and he made a feeble effort to smoke, but it was the effort of the mind trying to resume habit, and he soon tossed the cigarette to one side. He looked up at us, and I saw that his eyes had even a less virile fire than on the night before. The man was dying, and he knew it, and faced it.

“Any wolf signs?” he suddenly asked.

“Why, no. None that we have seen,” Kentuck answered.

“And it ain’t snowed none since—since I’ve been here?”

“No, the trails are still clear and sharp.”

“Then I want you to get ’em and bury ’em. That is, put ’em up in the trees where the wolves can’t get ’em,” he said, and Kentuck and I stared at him, wondering if his mind had been delivered to delirium.

“Who do you mean?” I asked, bending forward, and looking at him.

“Royce, my pardner, and that squaw, Mary.”

We were on our knees now, and looking at him open-mouthed.

“Yes, they’re dead,” he added. “You’ll find Royce just out at the edge of this patch of trees, on the north side. Then, farther to the east, I think you’ll find her. Both shot. Go and see, won’t you? I could rest better, it seems to me, knowin’ that they’ve been—been cared for. They’ve been askin’ me to see to it, when I was here alone, goin’ out and starvin’ because I didn’t have strength to do more than grab raw oatmeal and bacon and put on a little more of the wood. Royce was always great

for cuttin' wood. He always piled enough up in each camp to last a week. I owe him that much."

We hurried out of the tent after refilling the stove to its capacity, and made our way toward the northern part of the timber. The dogs began to howl again, that same unearthly call of requiem. We had not far to look. There were tracks where men had run backward and forward, as if dodging behind trees, two freshly cut stumps where Royce had cut wood, and then we found his body. It was doubled up behind a tree, face downward in the snow, with a rifle lying beside it. He had two bullet wounds, as we could make out from the stains on the snow, and such examination as could be made of him under conditions.

"Let's get him into the crotch of a tree," Kentuck said softly, and we adopted that primitive method, in the bitter cold, of giving him the most fitting tomb we could master. We carried him far away from the camp where he had died, however, as we did not know how long we might be there. Three of the dogs howled dismally as we passed them, but the fourth lay still and inert, lifting a slow head, and running out a tongue that was not red. Even in that moment of grewsomeness, I no-

ticed it with a sinking of the heart, for it meant that another dog, Keno, one of my original lot, was doomed; but I said nothing to Kentucky as we lifted that frozen body up into the branches after emptying the pockets, lashed it to limbs laid in the boughs, and left it to its rest.

“He said to the east,” Kentuck muttered, as we retraced our steps. “I wonder how it all happened! Poor girl! The ‘Big Chicken,’ I called her in a joke. Now I must call her Mary. It seems more fitting.”

We began circling along the outer edge of the trees, seeking, yet dreading to find, that second relic of a tragedy which we could not understand. She was there, laid out on the snow, with her arms folded; but, to our surprise, a breastwork of fallen trees, almost impregnable, had been barricaded across her form to protect her from the ravages of beasts. We tore them away, and spent an hour constructing such a platform as we could between the trees, and then went back to the tent, and found a blanket, in which we bound her body as we lifted her up to that crude sepulcher. Her face was unmarred, and her eyes were closed. She had been shot from behind, and death must have been instantaneous. For this at least we

were glad, believing she had passed without suffering; but we wondered why or how.

"I'm goin' to do one thing more," Kentuck said softly, "before we leave here. I'm goin' to make a cross for her. You see, I knew her, and she was Constantine's sister. He'd like it better if he knew that she was put to rest like a Christian; like someone who had been to school at Holy Cross Mission."

I agreed with him, and we cut two saplings that we could take into the tent, thaw, and peel, for that humble headmark of the young woman who had paid her life for the red gold. I do not think we felt as much sympathy for Royce, of whose antecedents we had heard nothing creditable, and of whose end we were still unaware. But it did seem hard that this Indian girl should have delivered her life so uselessly, when but a few weeks before we had seen her dancing vainly with the gaudy moccasins in a smoke-filled hut back in the camp. The camp! That was hundreds of miles away, and now seemed the heart of civilization fully developed!

It was afternoon by the time we had performed these simple services for the dead, and we went back to the tent, and warmed water for our hands, and piled more fuel in the stove,

which, from time to time, we had replenished.

"You—you put 'em away? Put 'em away right, did you? I heard your axes." Sparhawk rolled his head feebly toward me as he asked his question.

"Yes. In the very best way we could."

"I'm glad. I think it makes it easier for me. And—say—you'll do as much for me?"

"If we have to; but, pshaw! You haven't left us yet! Brace up."

"Oh, what's the use in your tryin' to con me? I know! I'm 'most in. You can go to cuttin' the poles now. It won't bother me. I'm ready to go. The game's over. You'll keep your word, I know. I like you. You're my sort. But, my God! How I wish I might have lived to have one more try at you. I can die, though. I'm game enough for that."

In the face of that brave submission I could not dissemble with false, encouraging words, for I knew, as well as did he, that it was a matter of but a few hours. He did not say anything more until we had made our meal, and I had examined and done what I could for the stricken dog. But that loss to ourselves, vital as it was, was forgotten in the recollection of the graver tragedies which we had brought to a close. Sparhawk recurred to it

himself, and all the time his strength was rapidly failing.

“ A buck up at Fort Hamlin told me and Royce about this red gold and its cuss,” he said, looking at me as I sat beside him. “ We came down to Neucloviat, hopin’ to find out somethin’ about it. Then we heard that Barstow was dead, and about give up. Mary and her brother comes back. She shows up with the moccasins with the nuggets on ’em, and she tells Royce that the woman that dies told her what Barstow had said about his findin’ the gold, and where it was; but she won’t tell Royce. He plans to marry her, bein’ as she ain’t forgot all the decency they taught her down at Holy Cross, but along comes this Hatchet.”

He twisted in his blankets with pain, and I tried to make him more comfortable; but he was querulous, and wanted to finish his story. Perhaps as a vindication of his own part in the affair.

“ The Hatchet and Royce sized each other up. The buck knew that Royce was after the girl, and he was after her, and I guess it was for the same reason—to find where that cussed gold came from. I wish to Heaven we’d never heard of it! But she takes to the Sioux. You

remember that night at the dance? Well, Royce was for killin' him then. I wish I'd have let him do it. I was an idiot that I didn't!

“ We found that the Hatchet had won her, and says Royce to me: ‘ We’ll watch the buck. He’s after the gold, because he knows what gold’ll do. We’ll watch the buck!’ So from that time we never paid no attention to this Mary, but the Hatchet couldn’t cook a bean without our knowin’ it. Royce and me took turns. Maybe the Hatchet knew it. I’m not sure that he did, or that he didn’t. If he did he showed some guts, because he kept his trap shut, and just led us on, and on, till he got us up here where he wanted us, and my fight mighty near busted the plans, because if you hadn’t stopped ’em, the boys down at Neucloviat would have run us out. Wish they had—meanin’ no offense to you!

“ We saw the Hatchet pull out, and he met the girl down by the Ramparts. It was all made up, I guess, between them. We went back to the camp, and got our dogs and outfit, which had been lashed to the sled for a week, just waitin’ for this. We kept behind ’em all the time, and the Hatchet either let on he didn’t know we were follerin’ him, or kept from showin’ it. He took us farther than we reck-

oned he would go, but we hung on like coyotes on a herd.

“ By and by we got careless like, and one of our dogs died, and the wolves got another, and we had to leave one, and it was hard sleddin’. The wolves was around us nearly all the time. They’d come nights, out in the woods, lean and hungry, and try to get the dogs; but we always drove ’em off. Maybe it was the shots let the Hatchet know he was bein’ chased. I don’t know about that. Then we camped here. Some time. I don’t know when. It seems like three or four years ago, now.

“ We killed one of our last dogs to feed the others. Grub was gettin’ scarcer all the time. We got up in the mornin’ to break camp. Royce goes out to see whether the wind’s come up to fill the Hatchet’s trail. I was in the tent. He yells for me, and I knows by the sound some-thin’s wrong. I runs out. *Bing!* goes a rifle off in that patch of timber you’ll see about a hundred yards ahead, and Royce begins to run back toward the tent. He runs in, and says to me: ‘ It’s the Hatchet. He’s after us.’

“ Then he grabs his rifle, and starts back out. He makes it to the trees where you found him, and I’m tryin’ to see where the Sioux is. There was another crack, and I heard

Royce yell: 'Get your gun! Quick! He's plugged me!' I runs back to the tent, and while I'm inside I hears another shot or two, and then, when I comes out, there's another, and Royce, my pardner, is crumplin' up like a busted egg, and the rifle falls out of his hand. I'm sore, and run to see if I can help him, when I hear another shot, and a ball takes past my head.

"Well, that made me hotter'n ever, and I ran outside the woods to see. There stands the Hatchet, with his gun up, takin' aim at me. I gets behind a tree, just as he shoots, although it's no bigger'n your thumb."

Sparhawk stopped to cough in the ghastly, broken-lunged cough of a dying man, and it was a full three minutes before we could get him comfortable again, and then he lay there for some time, gasping, before he spoke.

"Where was I? Oh, yes. About the Hatchet. He started back toward the woods, as if tryin' to draw me out. He did, because I was sore, so sore I'd have gone to hell to have felt his sorrel throat in my hands. The trees was in the way, so I stepped to the open. I lifts the rifle to shoot, and just as my finger was on the trigger somethin' happened. I heard a yell! It was that Mary, and she run

out and got between me and him before I could stop my finger. I could have shot myself when I see her fall. I hadn't nothin' agin' her. I sort of liked her. And there she went down, like a sack of salt with the bottom cut, slow like.

"I dropped my gun down and cussed, and would have gone over to see how bad she was hurt. The Hatchet is above her. I don't look at him. I'm sorry for her. Then comes something that knocks me over, there's a streak of red fire through me, and as I fall the sound of a shot. That Hatchet's got me!

"I don't know what it was made me lie still when somethin' kicked me in the ribs. Maybe because I was too weak to open my eyes, and didn't care. I knew without lookin' at him that the Hatchet did it, and that he was standin' there over me to see whether I was done for or not. I reckon he thought I was, for he went on over, and from where I lay I could see he done the same to poor old Royce. He's a ravin' madman, and is mutterin' to himself. He gets our ax, and I hear him slashin', and I worked my hand up, and stuffed my parka into the hole he'd drilled in me, and waited.

"I guess I went off onct or twice, and it's a wonder I didn't cash in then. When I come

to I heard an ax, then it stopped, and through my eyewinkers I see the Hatchet make for the tent, as if he was in a hurry. He takes what he wants, grabs our other two dogs, and away he goes, stoppin' only onct, and that was when he passed the place where Mary lay. Then he went on. I waited a long time. The cold had kind of stopped the blood. I crawled back to where my pardner was. Already he was cold. It took me an hour to make the tent, and when I come to the next time, I was about froze. There was coals left, and I put in some of the pile of wood Royce had cut, and got into the blankets, and went off again."

He coughed violently, and Kentucky threw more wood into the stove, and handed me the flask, as if suggesting that it might prolong Sparhawk's life. I gave the dying man another dram of it, and he strengthened momentarily, and went on, as if eager to be through:

"It seemed to me it must have been a year that I was here alone, with them outside there in the cold, and me crawlin' out to get the last of the sticks Royce had cut. I know'd I had to make 'em last a long time, because I was too weak to cut any more, and so, sometimes for what seemed like two or three days, I'd let the fire go out after I'd clawed off a piece

of blanket to make another start with. Sometimes I think I slept a week.

“ Things began to come to the tent—the Hatchet, Mary askin’ me to tell Constantine, and Royce sayin’, ‘ The wolves’ll get me if you don’t get up and make a cache. You ain’t goin’ to leave me out there in the cold, are you, pard?’ and then I’d try to get up, and fall over again. And I couldn’t cook stuff, because I was too tired, and it hurt too bad, and I ate the grub raw. And a lot of fellers I know’d down in the Cœur d’Alenes, men that’s been dead a long time, came and sat around the blankets, and talked, and said I was about due, and then it didn’t seem so bad, and everything got blurred like, and I felt better. All I had to do was to put in a stick of wood now and then, rememberin’ all the time that when it was gone I was done for, and I didn’t care so much, at that.”

He was babbling again, and Kentucky got up and went outside, as if he could not endure the sound, while I sat by Sparhawk’s side, and tried to soothe him. His mind ran on the trail and other actions. Sparhawk was one of the dynamiters, all right. I learned that while I sat there by his side waiting for the end. It came late at night, and was preceded by clarity,

that strange gift of God, as if He lends time for review to those whose lives are done.

It was late, and still, and cold outside, snapping cold, when Sparhawk suddenly lifted himself to his elbows, and said, in a hollow, far-away voice, as if he were already speaking from beyond the pale:

“I’m goin’ now. And I’m not afraid! It’s the Hatchet’s winning. He’s got his satisfaction. He’s gone on after the gold—the red gold that was the kind on the moccasins, and it’ll do him no good. Hell itself made it red, and it’ll redden the lives of all them that goes after it! You’ve stood by me, and—thanks!”

He dropped back before that final word was spoken, and it came fluttering from his lips to pass unheard in a silence less profound than that which engulfed us as we vainly tried to revive him, there in the cold heart of the Arctic wastes and the Arctic night, and the candle, steadily burning in its stick, showed that he had died with a cynical leer on his face, as if ridiculing us for our quest, and for the very act of pausing to be with him in the end.

Had either of us been in his place, and he in ours, he might have passed on callously, justifying himself with the reasoning that to pause would not prolong life, and that sooner

246 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

or later all men must die. Hard had he lived, and hard did he die, up there in the end of the world, and we knew that from then on the trail would have but one set of sled, and one pair of moccasins' marks, to the very end, whatever that might be.

CHAPTER XVI

AN UNEXPECTED BLOW

SOMETHING in us rebelled at laying the body of Sparhawk beside that of the poor girl he had unintentionally killed, although to have done so would save time. So, hard pushed as we were, we paused long enough to build another platform in the trees, and laid the Cœur d'Alener there in his bound blanket.

Every hour was now precious to us, and yet we had to build one more cache in the trees near the tent on which to store what was left of the food belonging to Sparhawk and Royce. Evidently the Hatchet, traveling light, had taken but little of it, and left the remainder scattered about, either through Sioux profligacy, or because he was eager to get away from the scene. Perhaps, also, as suggested by Kentucky, there had lurked in his mind the thought that with one mouth less to feed, he could reach his goal, and return at leisure to seize the supplies of the white men whom he had sped into eternity.

"The Hatchet's trail is about finished," Kentuck said, as he thoughtfully wrapped some of the food into a compact bundle. "It looks to me as if he has an idea he could come back here 'most any time, and get this grub."

Of the food there was not much; but even that slab of bacon, heel of flour, few pounds of oatmeal, can of baking powder, and two sacks of cornmeal that we were to leave behind were worth their weight in gold. But we knew that we could not add a pound's weight to our sled, because we were faced with another loss, and must go on, with but three dogs. I knew that could we lay up for a week, there was a chance of saving his life, and the four dogs were not animals to me. They were friends I had petted, and who loved me, as I did them. I wavered for a long time over that last sacrifice. And I could not be the executioner.

"Kentuck," I said, as we were making our last preparations, and had pegged the adventurer's tent securely so that it might withstand any sudden wind, "I can't kill that dog. You'll have to do it."

It was the only time I ever knew him to falter. He turned squarely on me, and answered: "I'd as soon put a man to death as kill Keno. You do it, Tom. It's all we can

do. Of course, he's got to die. We cain't leave him here."

"I'll be hanged if I will!" I retorted.

"Well, I won't, and that's an end to my part of it. You'll have to!"

I looked at him, and saw that he would not, and so faced the necessary task. I felt like a murderer as I assured myself that my gun was working, and took a long time to be sure of it, for my heart was heavy. I stood outside the tent when Kentucky called:

"Just wait about five minutes, won't you, Tom? You see, the fact is, I'm like you. Keno and me has been friends, and he's done his best for us, and he's worked himself to death for us on this cussed trail, and—well, I don't want to hear the shot!"

He turned and hurried away, and I stood there with the gun in my hand in my mackinaw pocket. I walked out to where the dogs were. Three of them were up to greet me with wagging tails; but Keno lifted his head only, and tried to tell me in his way that he was ill. I bent over him, and patted the faithful head, and he licked the hand that was preparing to put him out of existence. I held his head close up against my side, and he rested it there, as if believing me his natural protector.

I suppose that I am a fool! I suppose you will call me a fool when I tell you that I couldn't shoot, and that my eyes were blinded! But I slipped the pistol back, and picked Keno up in my arms, and carried him to the sled.

"Kentuck! Oh, Kentuck!" I called.
"Come here."

My trail partner came slowly toward me, and his face was grave.

"I didn't hear it, thank Heaven!" he said.

I pointed at Keno, lying on the front end of the sled, in a little bed made in its hollow tarpaulin.

"I'll try to pull harder to-day," I said, and Kentucky Smith shoved out his hand.

"You don't have to," he said, "because I'm goin' to do about two men's work myself."

And so we resumed the trail, with an added burden of weight, and a dog less to help drag it across the snow; but to this day I am unashamed.

We learned that the Hatchet had camped but a mile ahead of his pursuers on that fateful night, and, as far as we could read the story from the snow, he had left Mary to pitch camp, and turned back to watch their preparations for the night. Evidently he had then returned, and in the morning made that desperate jour-

ney to annihilate his trackers. Where he had halted on that night were blackened sticks, and nearly all the tracks around were those of the squaw who was, unconsciously, so near the end of life. Out at one side was the frozen, famished body of another dog, that had evidently succumbed to the same scourge that was decimating our team. That was all, and the Hatchet's trail led on toward the northern hills, that rose higher and higher in front of us.

We came to another place where he had halted. Another straggling stretch of timber cut across a valley, and here we found a bundle. It consisted of his stove, together with Mary's extra clothing and blankets, proving that the weight was telling on him, and that he was sacrificing everything, save food, to lighten his outfit.

We hurried forward as fast as we could, without apprehension of overtaking him very soon, for we knew that he must be at least three or four days ahead of us. And of this we were not sorry, for the Hatchet had proved that following him was like crawling into a jungle thicket after a wounded tiger. Indeed, we speculated, as we tugged and dragged alongside our trail-worn dogs, what could be the outcome of our meeting, and whether we should

have to kill him in self-defense, or, like Sparhawk and Royce, we should come upon him too unexpectedly.

Keno, faithful, and striving to understand, insisted on getting off the sled at intervals, and staggering alongside. He would crowd up beside his old teammates, and turn back appealing eyes, as if asking why we had taken him out of the harness. His dumb distress haunted me continually as I pushed at the sled handles, or took my turn with a rope across my shoulders, pulling sometimes so hard that my snowshoes buried themselves in the softer places. Then he would begin to lag behind, and we would have to pick him up and lay him, panting, on the sled again.

Another dog showed signs of falling ill, by his lumbering gait, drooping tail, irregular efforts at pulling, and disinclination to seize his scant rations.

"It's too bad," Kentucky said, as we stopped to make camp on the third night out from the Sparhawk-Royce resting place. "It looks as if we'll have to leave stove and tent, to lighten up, the same as the Hatchet. We cain't go much farther with this load, and another dog goin' out of business."

I did not answer, being too tired; but I knew

that he was not whimpering or complaining; merely stating inexorable truth. We must lighten the load or abandon the chase, and the latter alternative was unbearable. It had become an obsession with us. We had come so far, over so many hundred miles of heart-breaking trail, through heart-chilling cold, that we would have died rather than turn back. We were in the midst of heavy trees, and it was already dark, for we had resolved always to pitch camp where the Hatchet had stopped before resting, and this day had been long and hard. And the trees above us seemed gloomy as they stood, clouded firs with low-hanging limbs creeping along the ground, and silver birches, denuded by winter, and with gaunt arms.

It was my night to do the cooking. We unharnessed the dogs, and gave them their fish, threw the line between the trees, and dragged the canvas across it, mounted the stove with its battered pipe that refused to 'join, brought in the blankets, and opened the grub sack.

I gathered nearby dead brush to start the fire, and had my hand in the flour sack and the sourdough can unswaddled, when I heard Kentucky's ax swinging into the tree he had chosen

for fuel. I hoped it would have soft boughs on the end that we could drag in for a mattress over the snow, because I was deathly tired and stiff. My scant supply of brush was almost exhausted, and I went out and found some more, in the still white of the snow, and under the thin light of the stars.

"Got it 'most down?" I shouted, as the ax rested.

"Yes! Just a minute more!"

There were two or three more swinging strokes, and then the crash of the falling tree as its fronds swept downward to the bed of snow. It seemed to me that I heard an exclamation, and I waited an instant, with an armload of brush, to hear the ax resume. A premonitory chill attacked me, and for some inexplicable reason I shouted: "Kentuck!"

There was no answer, and I started toward him, forgetting that my snowshoes were sticking in the snow outside the tent.

"Oh, Tom! Come here! I'm afraid you'll have to help me," I heard his voice, and even then I distinguished in it a strained note.

I ran to the snowshoes, slipped my feet into the thongs, and hurried over the snow. Once I almost fell as, in the darkness, they tangled

in the tops of brush concealed by the snow beneath. I ran forward.

"Here I am," the voice called, and I turned in its direction, to find him lying under the fallen tree on his back.

"I can't get clear," he said, "and somehow, Tom, I'm afraid one of my legs is caught. It hurts, and I can't use it. Help me out, won't you?"

I tried to drag him free; but had to desist because it pained him. The tree was not large, but was too heavy for me to lift. I cut a pole, and tried to move it with this lever; but it turned soggy, and then fell back into place, its limbs clinging to the snow in which they were imbedded. I hurriedly cut another sapling in the darkness, and worked it underneath as a support, then cut the tree in two, every blow torturing my pinioned companion. I got him free at last, and he made a heroic effort to rise; but he could not. I thought it must be his snowshoes, and burrowed under with my hands to unfasten the long, clumsy frames. Again he tried, and then settled back.

"Old man," he said, "it's no use. My right leg is broken somewhere below the knee. I can feel the bone grate when I twist. It's all up with us!"

I hurried back and got the sled, and lifted him on it, and dragged it to the tent, where the fire was almost out. I piled in the remnant of my brush, and unrolled the blankets on the snow.

“Try to stick it out a few minutes,” I said, “while I get some wood. Whatever else we have to have, the first is fire.”

I rushed back out, and worked madly there in the gloom, cutting sufficient firewood to last for a while, and then returned with it piled on the sled. And, surmising that it might be serious, I slashed off and brought back with me the top boughs of the tree, to protect the blankets from the snow. I refilled the stove, piled the boughs deeply and smoothly, and helped him to roll off the blankets until I could lay him upon this comfortable couch. I made three other candlesticks, and, reckless of the expenditure of light, put the tent in a blaze. Without much effort I removed his trousers. Our fears were confirmed. His right leg was broken—a compound fracture that would be serious anywhere, but here might be fatal!

I began to straighten it out. The stove roared to a red heat, and the tent became hot. As yet the moment of acute suffering had not come to his nerves.

“It was my snowshoe,” he gasped, as I worked over him, forgetting all else at the moment. “The heel caught in the brush as I stepped back in the dark. It wasn’t a big tree, but it caught me just right, as I fell while trying to stand clear of it. What on earth are we to do now?”

“Stay here till it gets better,” I asserted, and he did not answer. “I’ll have to hurt you while I try to set it, old man; but you must bear it. Wait till I cut one of the blankets for bandages to hold it.”

I had seen crude surgery performed, but to see and perform are different. I cannot detail the hour of agony that followed as I did my best; how the sweat stood out on his forehead, and his hands clenched and unclenched, and he twisted, and writhed, and bit his lips; but he did not surrender, or lose consciousness, as I did my best, and laid thin sticks of wood alongside the broken leg, and wrapped the woolen strips around to hold them in place. He went into a pain-disturbed, broken sleep at last; but it was daylight when I completed my task. I went out, and by candlelight cut birch trees of the right size, selected my pieces, brought them in, and thawed them by the stove, and then peeled off the bark, and made splints such as

are used by the lumbermen. Admirable and efficacious!

Utterly worn out, I crept outside to pile up more fuel and feed the dogs. Beside the tent lay a still, brown heap. It was Keno, dead. We were one dog less, and I had lost a pet. It seemed to me as if everything in the world were against us as I swung my ax blade into the remnants of the tree that had been our undoing. I made the breakfast without disturbing Kentuck, then aroused him. He was far better than I had thought he would be, his splendid youth and constitution, his uninjured body kept clean and abstemious all his life, now repaying him.

"It aches like the devil," he said, "but I reckon that cain't be helped. I can eat, all right, and that's somethin' to be mighty thankful for. When did you work those out?" He saw the crude splints.

"Last night," I said. "They will have to be used as best we can, inasmuch as we have nothing else."

I did not tell him that the faithful Keno was gone, but went out to put the dog's body in the branches of a tree. The wolves should not have him! When I returned, Kentuck called to me to rest, and I threw myself on the

blankets by his side, and was soon fast asleep. At intervals he awoke me when he moved, and I crawled up to put more fuel in the stove. Outside, the dogs sniffed round the tent fly, and the short Arctic day swept on across the sky.

I slept four hours, and then went out again, and cut wood as long as the light lasted, and piled it by the fly, and made the tent comfortable with a view to a prolonged stay; but all the time my heart was sinking when I thought of our scant food, and of what might be ahead of us in this last calamity.

When I went to sleep that night, Kentuck appeared better, but still lay there thinking about something, and now and then his face twitched with pain. It was dawn when he awoke me—not the dawn of the Southland, but of those chill latitudes into which we had penetrated in this foolish chase.

“I’ve been thinkin’,” he drawled, as I made our simple breakfast. “And it’s this way: We’ve come this far, and now, almost when we must be near the end of the trip, and when grub is about gone, and dogs ’most dead, I have to have this hard luck. And I don’t believe much in luck, as a rule. There’s just one way out of it. Tom, you’ve got to go on alone.”

I turned on him with protest. He silenced

me, as he lay there on his blankets and bed of boughs.

“No use, old man,” he said, “it’s the only way. You cain’t do nothin’ much for me here that I cain’t do myself. You can fill the tent with wood, so it’ll be close. You can bank the tent, and brace her so she won’t sag or blow over. You can make kindlin’ and get grub up around me so’s I won’t starve, and I’ll be good for four or five days, or longer, and that’s all it’s goin’ to take.”

“But I might go farther.”

“Then you’d die, because the grub wouldn’t last. And if you set here we’re goners. And if you don’t go, ’most any night there may come a wind, and out goes the trail of the Hatchet. It’s stay here and die, or go on and take a chance of makin’ good. Tom, you’ve got to go on, and you’ve got to go as soon as you can!”

For an hour we argued, with him on the blankets and I squatted by him; then I had to agree. So it was that I again worked late, and did all I could, and made ready for my start into that still, stretching waste on the trail of the Sioux.

CHAPTER XVII

ALONE I CONTINUE

It was harder now that I was alone, scant as was my load. I had but two dogs, Malicula, loyal and steady, and Barsick, the undemonstrative, as companions; for another dog had been left behind, back there in the tent in the woods, where Kentuck was alone.

All day long we tugged together, dogs and master. So long had Malicula followed those other sled tracks, traced out like a faint road in the snow, and frozen into little rough lines, that he took the road instinctively. For hours at a stretch I did not look at the land around me, save to remember landmarks, looking backward and impressing my memory with details that I must remember for my return in case the shroud of snow obliterated the trail.

Now it was a hummock in the wide expanse; then it was a group of trees. Again it would be a lone pinnacle of a hill, and a wide *tundra*, where I noted my compass, and dragged off my mittens to write, with stiff, cramped fingers,

the pointing of the needle. I was divided between two cares—solicitude to remember the backward route to where lay that brave, helpless, crippled man; and watchfulness ahead.

On the sled in front of me, caught by a mere string that could be broken, lay Dan's rifle, loaded; for I proposed to take no chances in case of conflict with the desperate Indian adventurer ahead. Not only was my own life at stake, but that of Kentuck, left behind, and to whom sooner or later I must return and assist, lest he die there miserably, in that terrible isolation. And always I was alert, constantly fearing that I should come upon the Hatchet so close that he would sense me, and lie in ambush to murder. Again I would steady myself with the thought, repeated aloud, that he would not pause until he came to those high mountains where stood three pinnacles, in distorted shapes, the pinnacles of the legend and the curse.

I camped late, and was grateful, in a peculiarly puerile way, to the Hatchet for having left me a wickiup, which gave shelter and a bed of boughs, the remnants of a charred log, and a piece of a snowshoe thong. I had but a robe, and the dogs slept on either side of me, their warm bodies lending comfort—Malicula

bravely taking the outer edge, and the worn Barsick, black-coated, the inner. I talked to them as we ate together, and lay down to rest together, and I knew for the first time the depths of canine sympathy and companionship. Ah, I was learning, and coming nearer to nature's heart, away off up there in the frozen, uncharted lands on which God Himself seemed to have set His seal of isolation!

I slept late, because I was tired out, and took the trail reluctantly. Ahead of me was nothing but the rolling *tundra*. I may have plodded hours without noticing it, but I suddenly discovered something new and foreboding in the pale signs of the snow. They were tracks, huge and menacing, the tracks of timber wolves. They ventured alongside that other trail, and at times passed over it, obliterating it with the marks of broad, spread pads.


Persistently they were there, always defined remorselessly, as if they had scented and followed the Hatchet, and bided their time, as he must have bided his when he knew that behind him were men whom he proposed to make his prey. They were still there when the dusk made the trailing difficult, and I stopped watching them, leaving it to the intelligence of the great, gray beast ahead to keep the tracks,

and bring me to a camping place. He stopped at last, and we were in a little draw, where willows, swept by early winter winds, reared their tops above the snow, melancholy and plumelike.

On this night there was no friendly shelter of trees, only those thin branches, congealed in the icy cold, still and immovable, above the place where the Hatchet had slept, and where we slept. But to-night the dogs huddled closer.

In the morning I bent over to study the strange writing around me. There was something peculiar in it. I stopped and picked it up. It was an empty shell of a repeating rifle. I found another. Again my foot struck something hard. It was the skull of a dog, polished to an ivory white. I wandered farther, more intent on my search. I found another skull, this time of a wolf, and farther out the vertebræ of two other dogs. Around all was that confusion of tracks. I hurried out in widening circles to examine the trail in the dim light of the morning. It was plain.

When the Hatchet left that camp he had no dogs, but pulled his sled alone. The good fight he had made had not saved his team from that murderous and silent horde of gray. They had followed him, and fallen on his dogs, and though he shot to protect them, had feasted upon them



and their own dead. The wolves were his final enemies. A chill went through my heart, and yet I reasoned that, inasmuch as I had heard no cry, they must have passed on, and I prayed to God they would not scent me and return.

Purposely I delayed when I found his next camp, which was early in the evening. I waited until the light was strong, and studied it. The wolf tracks were nowhere around. I sighed with relief as we started, for it convinced me that after that one desperate raid they had followed him no farther.

I passed with a lighter heart up a long series of low-lying hills, and then, at the top, paused with a long cry of excitement.

Shining in the distance, as cold and hard as signposts of fate, were three pinnacles rising from a chain of low mountains. Ghastly and white they appeared when outlined against the dense blue of the sky. And the trail headed toward them, straight as the flight of an arrow. They paled away as the day died out, and I did not hasten, fearing all the time to surprise this deadly character, who had struggled on, over dead bodies, to his ambition.

Without a fire, and out there on the rolling *tundra*, we slept, and I ate dog fish with the dogs, and rolled myself in my robes, and went

to sleep, under the scant edge of the tarpaulin pulled across by the side of the upturned sled, in a foreboding blackness. The stars did not shine, and the dogs crawled closer and whimpered a little, as if sensing something beyond my intuition or perception.

I awoke in the night, and listened. Across the wastes came the creeping, stealthy sounds of something—the army of the snow set marching by the wind, and sweeping around to annihilate me. I shuddered, and could no longer sleep. The wind was not high, but it carried a menacing message, the whisper of death riding on the wings of the night. Drifts piled beside us, rendering our place warm and sheltered, with a false, soothing warmth, alluring and lethal.

I listened for the storm to increase, but it did not. It merely continued to sweep across ceaselessly, as if it were but the sound of that army—that army of snow crystals released from the frozen surfaces to overwhelm me. But I swore they had not come to conquer me here, and, long before morning, had resolved to face it at the first light of dawn. It must be that the mountain range was but a few miles beyond me, and that, in the shadow of those barricades, I should find still air, and fuel of some sort, if

nothing more than the humble pussy willow of the watercourses.

The dogs whimpered and whined as I harnessed them after our cold morning meal, and went fearfully and with turned heads into the cutting gale. Their feet were raw, and spots of red marked their footsteps as they struggled forward.

The dawn came, like a twilight, chilling and steady. The trail was obliterated for the first time in that long journey, but we had the landmarks in view, faintly visible through the snow dust, and toward the range we headed, fighting our way foot by foot, and caring nothing for guiding tracks. The fear of surprising the Hatchet was lost in the face of that more imminent fear of dying, out there in a blizzard. We stiffly fought our way up a slope, and dropped down into a valley, where I presumed a stream ran in summer, and as suddenly as we descended its slopes the wind died.

The dogs took courage and strength, and moved faster. A clear, dark line was between me and the foot of the hills, that rose, abrupt and rugged, as if carved from the snow and ice. As we drew closer, I saw that their tops were so precipitous that snow had failed to find lodgment, and gave a sigh of momentary

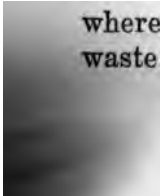
268 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

enjoyment, for there, discernible in the distance, were the shapes of the needle, the satanic outline, and the resting eagle!

Somewhere at their bases the trail would end. Somewhere at their feet was this undisturbed treasure, which had lured so many of us into these desolations, the lure for whose answer some of us had paid with our lives.

In a stillness rendered more profound by contrast with the storm from which we had emerged, we plodded forward. I saw that the dogs were sniffing now and then at the trail, and stopped them, and went ahead to brush away the surface snow with my mittens. It was there beneath, heading as were we, toward the peaks, the trail of the sled. We were still in the direct line, and now it would be but a short time until the end of the quest would be opened to view and action. I took the rifle from its lashings, saw that the lever worked, and laid it where it could be seized in an instant. The Hatchet must shoot true with his first shot, otherwise our chances would be equalized.

As we advanced, I strained my eyes for any thread of smoke to betray his camp; but nowhere was there anything to show that this waste had ever been violated by a human being.



I was more alert as we approached the thin timber, and carried my rifle on my arm, waiting for the opening of the battle, or a shout of warning.

None came. I was strung to the utmost tension, until my overwrought nerves vibrated when we passed into the birches and firs, all scrubby and scant.

I halted the dogs, and listened; but there was no sound, only a silence so vast that it was oppressive and tangible. It was as if the air itself, the coldness, the stillness, were weights suspended over me for my destruction. It was as if all the forces of nature were assembled to exterminate me when I had taken another step into that mysterious region of the accursed; as if the *sagas*, the *shamans*, and warriors of all the dead tribes were marshaling to bar my way, and sweep me from existence for my temerity.

It may have been my nerves, or it may have been something else—an underlying fear that there was something supernatural in this region which I had invaded; but I was afraid! My hair was on end, and bristled. There in the broad day I saw shapes in the trees, and heard sinister sounds, menacing me. I should have welcomed the sight of the Sioux and conflict

with something which I could see and understand. I was not afraid to die, but I was afraid of the phantoms conjured by my fears. It was all so still, so ghastly white, so terribly alone! Even the dogs appeared to sense it by their faltering, cautious steps, and crowded so close on me that Malicula once trod upon the ends of my long snowshoes, and almost threw me.

Again I stopped and looked for signs, walking warily backward and forward. A broken twig was my reward, and I stopped, as before, and swept away the snow. The trail was still there, leading through the thicket, where the Hatchet had gone steadily on. I left the dogs behind, and took the course, crouching behind the closest trees, and with my rifle hammer raised, and a finger in my mitten upon the trigger, cold and nervous. Step by step I slipped forward, peering this way and that in search of something—anything—that would expose the native who, to me, was the living death.

Suddenly, as I descended farther into what seemed to be the bed of a frozen stream, I saw a shape. It was his crude shelter, but from it there arose no smoke. I crept forward now, slowly and with caution, fearing that in the intense stillness the slipping of my snowshoes over the snow would betray me. I gained the

shelter, and looked around its corner. Its ashes were cold, and covered with a light drift of snow. I parted the fir boughs of this three-sided abode, and looked more closely.

From the pole above, against which leaned lopped limbs of heavy trees, with snow piled on top to give shelter and warmth, were hanging the scant sacks of his outfit. His blankets were thrown back in confusion, and his sled was upturned outside. His ax was where he had struck it into the side of a log, and his frying pan and coffeepot and kettle, blackened by many camp fires, were thrown carelessly into a corner. But there were no tracks.

For a long time I wondered at this, trying to reason out why it should be so. Here was his outfit, everything he had, and yet the fire was old, and everything appeared deserted. I could not imagine what had happened. I took courage from the fact that there were no signs in the snow, so lowered my rifle, and walked around for a closer inspection. It was plain that this was his outfit, left there in loneliness.

I kicked the log which had been laid in front of this crude dwelling place, but there was not a spark left in its charred sides. I stepped farther out, and looked around me. Nothing was in sight save this sole abrasion on nature.

Above me rose the three peaks, towering up into the deathly air. The trees stood as still as if carved from stone. Fifty or seventy-five feet beyond me ran something black and steaming on the surface. I walked toward it, wondering if I were to see another phenomenon of the Arctic, a spring so hot that it never froze. It ran for some distance before being masked with ice.

Almost at its brink my foot struck a bump in the snow. I did not notice it at the instant, for I was looking down into the bed of a stream running across a bed rock which was almost bare, but in whose leaves were long stringers of brilliant red, the red of the red gold!

I stumbled forward and slipped my feet from the thongs, and jerked off my mittens, and thrust my hands into that heated water poured forth from the fiery heart of the earth—or was it hell?—and caught up and let fall through them that lavish stream of gold.

It was there! Gold in greater abundance than I have ever seen! Gold that dripped from my wet fingers, and splashed back into the clear, warm water. Gold in such abundance that under my eyes lay a fortune. A stream almost paved with it, as if all the red gold of the world had been collected there to await my

coming! Farther and farther I plunged my hands, and piled it at the water's edge, a heap of it, until I had a pyramid, a fortune, the life's savings of many men, the sum of luxury, the dream of a miser!

Above me the peaks still stood in their strange shapes, looking down like so many judges ready to pass sentence. Above them was the cold, discerning sky, and beyond them the immutable spaces that had waited my coming. I was mad! I was bereft of all sense! I plunged into the stream, forgetful of the menace of the Hatchet, of the cold air, of the dangers of freezing when I stepped out, and walked through the shallow water.

I walked on gold, red gold! It was there! Mine! All I had to do was to scoop it up, each handful placing me higher on the ladder of the luxuries of life. My situation, my desperate condition, Kentucky Smith—everything was forgotten in that baptism of hot water as I stared with bulging eyes at the gold beneath my feet.

I was disturbed by the sound of wood striking wood, and down through the trees came the dogs, Malicula and Barsick, dragging the sled after them, and looking at me with appealing eyes. They were calling me to reason

—bringing me back to reality! I waded back toward them, and stepped out on the bank. Again my foot struck the object which I had first encountered, and it rolled away, and lodged but a few feet beyond. I stepped over and picked it up. It was a skull, freshly cleaned by ravenous teeth, and as I held its grewsome face toward me I saw that in the hollow grin was a broken tooth capped with silver. And almost beside it was something else. Even in that horrible moment I stooped to pick up the moccasins of gold.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PLACE OF THE RED GOLD

SLOWLY, as I stood there with them in my hand, I pulled my senses together, and subjugated both fear and elation, which were strangely intermingled. I went back to the Hatchet's camp, and started the fire in the charred embers he had left, and hastened to unpack the sled and don dry moccasins, condemning myself for rushing into the water in my moment of frenzy. I threw the dogs a half fish each, to keep them away from my heels, and went out and with my feet felt the thin top covering of light snow.


I found the Hatchet's rifle at some distance from where I had discovered his skull. It was empty, and the stock was cracked and smeared, where he had made his last desperate fight with the wolves after his ammunition was expended.

Probably he had clung to the moccasins through some wild pathetic regard for the squaw who had last owned them, and so brought

them back to the source of their gold. Perhaps they had been carried as a useless burden in his clothing when he fell, hampering his very movements in that last stand, when movement meant life. Perhaps they had aided the wolves and death.

The whole dread picture, brought up by imagination, did not serve to render the spot more habitable! I could not help but wonder if the smoke of my fire might not bring back that famished pack. I had more ammunition, I was certain, than the Hatchet had, but no more endurance. That pack must have been great in numbers, a horde of famine. And it must have been a persistent pack, wearing him out with sleeplessness and unrest, until he lost caution, and gave way to temper, and was ready to die rather than have them longer glaring at him from the shadows, and now and then encroaching, perhaps sometimes leaping across to get at him, when his fire died low.

I invoiced his food supply. The man must have been mad to stop there a day, when under quarter rations he could scarcely have made the return trip to Sparhawk and Royce's camp. I must fight off a similar madness. I must control myself lest that red temptation keep



me there a day too long, and send me backward starving, or drive me to madness and the end there by the steaming water.

At the very best I had not enough food to take me back to Kentuck on full rations. The dogs were the most important. Very well, I would eat no meat, and would cook the last of my dog fish and bacon sparingly, with oatmeal, and feed them on that. Kentuck and I had believed, as doubtless had the Hatchet, that the red gold was probably less than two days' journey from the camp where he left the body of Mary; but it was almost double that, so I must not delay.

My discoveries were not over, for I made one trip upward along the banks of the stream above where the hot spring entered to wash its golden freight. A cairn of rocks was there, and I wondered what meaning it could have, so worked for an hour exposing its contents. They were grewsome, for the face of Pitkok, frozen and wide-eyed, stared up at me. I was glad I had found him, for the last remnant of suspicion of Sam Barstow was swept away. I could tell Cavanaugh, if I survived to see him, that Sam had told the truth. The torn body was evidence. Pitkok had been killed by a bear in the very goal of his foolish ambitions. Hur-

riedly I replaced the stones, and hurriedly I went back to the Hatchet's camp.

I patched up the dogs' moccasins, and thought with some satisfaction that the day's rest would put them in better condition, if they were well fed. I went down to the stream to get water. It was salt, and impregnated with iron. I had to take the time to melt snow for my meager cooking. I cut and dragged great piles of fuel, so that, if the wolves returned, I should at least have flame. And then, when all these tasks were complete, I braved the stream, and scooped out more of the gold, until I must have had fifty pounds of it in the tin receptacles I had inherited from the Sioux.

It is with some pride, even at this moment, that I recall my restraint; for there lay temptation which was almost irresistible, but that would have certainly led me to death. I suppose I may have gathered more than fifty pounds of that red metal, reveling drunkenly in having so much of it at hand, under such a thin coating of gravel that all I had to do was to claw it from the natural riffles in the bed rock as the stream swept and cleaned it down the natural sluices. I still believe that nowhere in the world, not even on the Mother Lode, was

there ever such a placer deposit, in that same space at least.

And then at night I sobered down, and thought of the weight we must pull, of the long trail, of the shortness of food, of the condition of my two dogs, of how weak I would be when traveling on poor nourishment, and slowly, handful by handful, reluctantly lightened my treasure, and carried it back, and threw it into the stream, where it would again be caught and preserved for that time when Kentucky or I might come again. And even then it seemed to me that the voice of prescience told me that neither of us would ever again stoop to gather it!

As night came there was a shadowy depression over everything. The dogs by my side howled until I had to use harsh measures to still them, lest that far-reaching wail bring those enemies of the *tundra* down upon me, as they had come down on the Hatchet, whose skull and such of his bones as I could gather were resting in the crotches of a tree. It seemed to me that his spirit hovered outside the blazing logs, and that he glared at me with his fierce eyes, impotent and angry because I was the only one of that sorry procession to live. It seemed to me that he

wanted to drag me across the borderland of shadow.

I could not sleep. My nerves were tingling, and beside me the dogs shuddered, and whimpered, and burrowed against me, as if for protection. The northern sky grew lighter, a finger of flame appeared to stretch across it, to be followed by waving shrouds of white, like the vestments of an army of ghosts. They danced recklessly and rapidly across the vault of the night, and changed their colors to a riot of red, with here and there a somber spread of crimson and blue. They took fantastic shapes, as if rendering more unreal their dance of death. They threw, as if purposely, a background of light behind the three peaks above me, so that I might fully realize their dread presence, and see the cruel, malevolent, devilish face of rock.

But now that face in the twisting light seemed mobile, and sometimes leered, sometimes frowned, and 'most always threatened with such dread looks that I was chilled with a strange fear. The eagle no longer squatted, but his wings seemed lifting, little by little, and once I feared that he would launch himself downward, a mountain of stone, to bury me in his sweep. The trees beside our

camp seemed to shudder, and whisper, and turn toward me, and the faint sound of the running water was a demoniacal consultation and prediction of my end.

Nerves? I don't know! Perhaps; but what matter, so long as fear had gripped me, and tore at me, and made me long to scream aloud! I believe that I should have died had I been thus obsessed for ten consecutive nights in that place, and I thought of the Hatchet's terror. What must it have meant to him with that hereditary belief in spirits of the dead, in the supernatural lore of the Indians, and the possibility of the place of red gold being cursed forever! May he not have seen Royce and Sparhawk across the fire, even as I fancied I saw him? May they not have stretched clutching fingers toward him, to drag him out, as he did toward me?

I fought with myself, piled more fuel on, and suppose I went to sleep.

I was awakened by the most blood-curdling snarls and howls I have ever heard. Both dogs were on me, and mad with fear. In the light I could see that their ruffs were raised, until every hair was on end, and their fangs were bared beneath their snarling lips as they confronted something I could not see,

out beyond the flames. I threw them off, and got to my feet in one bound, with my rifle in my hand, my scalp itching as if with electric shocks, and my fingers twitching on the trigger. I scowled out into the darkness.

Nothing could be seen—nothing could be heard. I thought of wolves, and sprang to the fire, and kicked light sticks on it until it was in a furious blaze. I leaned across it, with the dogs so close to my heels that they were almost singed, and listened.

There was not a sound, save that made by the crackle of the flames and the stream which carried the red gold. It now seemed to me to be hissing and angry. The shadows outside were still, but they had assumed indefinite shapes. Invisible enemies were waiting for me outside the line of fire. With a sudden determination of anger, I leaped across it, and with its light at my back could see. I was prepared for an attack; but none came.

Under the stars and on the underglow, dim and spectral, of the snow, I could see everywhere. There was nothing in sight. Only that deathly immobility of tree and plain and hill, and above me the three pinnacles that were leaning forward to menace me and guard the treasure. The dogs had leaped, whining, after

me. Malicula stood between my legs, still growling and snarling at that something I could not see, and Barsick huddled at my feet, snapping now and then, as if attacking something invisible. I felt it, but could not see it, felt it as certainly as I am now alive!

I went back behind my barricade of fire, and sat there with my rifle between my knees, and my arms around my dogs, for centuries. I have lived a thousand years, if ever any man did, whether it be, as some might think, through fright and madness, or because every instant of that dread, expectant wait became a decade! And I am not afraid to die! Nor am I afraid of any living thing! But there was something there that night that was harder to wait for than either life or death!

I had packed the sled before rolling into my blankets, and all I had to do was to throw the latter in, lash the fastenings, hitch on the dogs, and go. I presume there are those who will say I was a coward when, at last, with the shriek of a madman, hoarse and inhuman, I caught the dogs, and dragged them out and slipped the harness over their heads.

All the time they snarled and threatened, but their anger was not directed at me, nor did they appear less eager than I to get away from

there. It was not later than four o'clock in the morning, but we plunged away from the stream of gold almost before the last sled lash had been recklessly thrown, and ran, until breathless, through the trees and up the long slope dividing the pinnacled rocks from the *tundra* beyond.

We ran until I was divested of parka and mackinaw, a piece at a time, and the sweat trickled across my face in that fearful cold, and my lungs were aflame, and the dogs were exhausted. Then we slowed down as our sense returned, and traveled only to keep off the chill until we were cool, and tired, and the great fear was gone—left behind!

They whimpered to me now when I came alongside them, and Malicula licked my hand, as if thanking me for taking them away from that place of the curse, where they could apprehend shapes that to me were invisible. And, tired as I was, every mile put behind lightened my fear, until, when we made the camp where I had last halted before venturing toward the peaks, I could pause, and wonder what had so obsessed me, and could endeavor to laugh at my past fears.

It had taken me three days to make the stream of treasure, and, with the additional

weight of the gold, it took me four to return. And the last of these I went with scarcely any food, striving to conserve it all for the dogs, and believing that could they but last to where Kentucky was camped, we could survive. If they did not—well, then the end was not hard to conjecture for both him and me, unless the chase, problematical anywhere that far north, yielded fresh meat. There were a hundred times on that terrible trail when I resolved to dump overboard the gold that I was bringing back, and then the determination rose triumphant that I would at least die with something to show for the trip.

I think that brooding, after all that I had endured, was beginning to tell on me; for little things were catastrophes. The breaking of a harness strand, the loosening of a sled lashing, the tripping of a snowshoe, the lightest scurry of wind, a moment's perplexity as to what course I should take on that vast *tundra* where the trails had been wiped out—any of these would drive me to a paroxysm of temper. I thank God that I did not abuse the poor dumb brutes that were giving their last ounce of strength in willingness and working with me as we trudged across that unending waste.

One morning after we had traveled until

noon, I found that I had left behind, inexplicably, the most precious of my possessions, my knife. I roared in anger, and shook my fists at the skies. I sprang to the sled, jerked off the lashings from the top, and took out the golden moccasins. I threw them as far as my arm could throw, cursing them as they fell heavily into the distant snow, as the cause of all my misfortune, and so, at last, they found a resting place after all their journeying, and all their association with tragedy. Symbols of death, and wooing, and fortune, they were left behind.

Twice I lost my way, and wandered vainly for hours, brushing or blowing the top coating of light snow aside, in quest of the sled trails made by the Sioux and me in that desperate northward chase.

A scarecrow of a man, worn to a razor's edge, and driving dogs who dragged themselves wearily over the trail, I came at last to the copse I knew. The dogs lifted their heads, and barked joyously, and plunged forward more rapidly. I saw that smoke was curling from the stovepipe, and was choked with joy, for I knew that Kentuck was still alive, and I am not sure that I did not cry as a woman from weakness and satisfaction as we stopped in front of the tent.

CHAPTER XIX

THE LONG TRAIL

HIS cheery "Hello!" was the most welcome sound I had heard in weeks. I hurried into the tent where he was lying, and he put a hand up to me. The tent was warm; but I had arrived none too soon.

"I got it!" I exclaimed, but he only smiled at me, with a pathetic, tired face. "It was there, all right, more than I can tell you of until I can eat. I'm all in!"

"Poor old chap," he said softly. "You look as if about one more day of the trail would have finished you, and then—then—what would have become of me!"

The half sob in the voice told me what he had feared, what he had suffered, and I turned my back to him, and tried to speak cheerfully, but scarcely recognized the thin, croaking voice as my own.

"The last of the beans are over there in the kettle," he said, and I seized them like a famished animal, checking myself only from the

danger of overeating by a remnant of will power. And in the night I arose and ate again, because the overworked body cried aloud for food, even in sleep.

I learned much of that terrible lapse which he had endured, helpless and alone. The other dog was dead. Once he had heard wolves, but they had been distant, and his fears had come to naught. His leg was doing as well as could be expected, and he had succeeded in removing the bandages the day before, and putting the crude splints closer. But it was a long time before we spoke of one necessity, and that was the supply of food. When we did it was with averted eyes, for each knew that there was scarcely any left.

"We'll talk about that in the morning," I said, as, half ill, I crawled into my blankets. And by the morning, so resilient is life, so tenacious, so self-repairing, that some of my courage had returned, and the world was more normal.

Kentuck must have been awake a long time, and careful not to disturb me, for he had started the fire from where he lay, and the smell of smoke awoke me. I was about to speak, but checked myself, and rested, with eyes closed, trying to reason out our best course. It came

to me, as a certainty, that our slim hope of life lay in pressing back to the place where the triple tragedy had been consummated, for there, at least, was a little food. Slowly I thought over the quantity I had left with Kentucky when I started on alone, and came to the conclusion that there could be scarcely any left. My resolve was taken.

I yawned and sat up, as if just aroused, and he looked at me with the look of a child staring at its guardian. In the daylight I saw how seriously his misfortune had told on him, and my heart sank a little, as I saw that his face was so much thinner, his hands so much more nervous, and his whole body so much wasted.

"Sleep well? You have been at it fourteen hours," he said. "But I was afraid you didn't because you moaned, and swore, and shrieked, in the night, sometimes."

"I feel fine," I asserted. "I did dream some; but that doesn't count."

I pretended to be thoughtful.

"I think I told you, last night, all about the place where the gold is, and that I found Pitkok's body as well as the Hatchet's, and that I brought away a little of the gold, all I could bring, on account of the weight?"

"Yes," he said; "you told me that much, and said the gold was in the sled. I'd like to see it."

"But I didn't tell you that I got quite a little food left by the Sioux."

"No!" he said incredulously. "Well, that's the best news of all."

He thought for a moment, and then his face twitched with the weakness of the man who has suffered illness, and he said: "Old man, I thought when you came in last night that you had been starving to death. I couldn't talk. This lump in my throat! That's why the gold you brought back didn't seem so good. It hurt mighty bad to look at you when you came in. I had to keep right quiet to—well, to keep from blubberin' like a baby!"

He had brightened as he talked, as if his mind were relieved, but I dared not meet his eyes lest he read that lie. I assumed a gayety I did not feel, and brought him the red gold, through which he ran his fingers, picking up a nugget now and then to inspect it, and studying that curious red while I prepared the breakfast. It was liberal. I resolved to have all I wanted once more before I died, no matter what the cost. After that I must—I can scarcely write now of how my resolution wavered, of

how cowardly I was, and of how I shrank from what must come.

“ But we must go on—to-day! ” I asserted. “ We must get back to that other camp, or we will starve, most certainly.”

“ Then we must leave this behind,” he asserted, sighing as he dropped the nuggets he had been holding into the black pot at his side.

“ Yes,” I assented. But it was another lie, for I had become so filled with hatred for that gold, and what it had cost, that I had resolved that I would return with it or die. “ I’ll cache it somewhere, so that we can get it if ever we come back.”

“ If we come back? If we come back! ”

His voice had the helpless tones of a man whose spirit has been broken by all that he has endured, and I knew, then, that Kentucky Smith had lived through centuries in that time when I was absent, as surely as had I, struggling always.

We broke camp at noon. I know it was noon when I lifted him to the sled, and prepared to say good-by to the scene of misfortune, for I looked at my watch and wondered how far we could travel, Malicula, Barsick, and I, before the last light waned. Every hour must be made

to count. Every mile traveled meant that much more of a chance to live. And God knows I was tired when we started, and that had not Kentucky Smith, broken, ill, and helpless, been there behind me, I would rather have taken my pistol and put a more merciful end to the faithful dogs and myself, than have attempted it.

It was that same interminable struggle, that same interminable suffering, that I had endured from the time I turned my back on the three peaks, now so far behind. The frozen meat of a dog, a stringy skeleton meat for the team, half rations for a man helpless and requiring nourishment, and quarter rations for myself, were the supplies with which I faced that journey, which had taken us three days to make when we assisted each other.

How I lied on that trip! How the cunning of a madness that had become constant made me dissemble about my share of the food! How many mornings I arose quietly, and stealthily, and weakly, and assured him that I had breakfasted, when my famished eyes followed every mouthful as he conveyed it to his lips! How I nibbled at the moldy dog fish, which I had reserved for myself, stealing rather from those poor brutes tottering alongside me in the trail than from Kentucky Smith.

He told me, long after, that there were times when he was afraid of me, as I reeled along the trail, singing in a cracked voice as I tried to make him feel that I was happy and confident. He told me long afterward that it took us six days to get back to the place where we had cached the food left by Sparhawk and Royce, and that at the last I heard sounds which were not audible, and threatened to kill him when he tried surreptitiously to lighten the load of the red gold. But to me much of it is a blank, and instead of six days we trailed through eternity, with that profanation of French, "Mush! Mush on!" always my sole thought.

I do remember this, that for a long time we traveled through silence, and that I was deathly ill, and that the snow was coated with red, which I thought was a coating of red gold, and that I cursed it, and that at last we saw something ahead that I vaguely remembered having seen before, as I gave a final stagger, threw the rope from my shoulder, and pitched headlong into the soft snow beside our trail.

The first thing of which I have a clear recollection is Constantine's face bending over me, and the hot, wonderful draft of meat broth poured down my throat; of how my clawlike

fingers seized the edge of the tin kettle, and of how I cried like a child, and tried to fight for its retention, as he pulled it away from me.

We were in that ill-fated camp, and the days had passed. Constantine had at last got word that his sister had started away northward with the Sioux, and, as it came to him from Taninaw, he surmised where they were going. He, too, had heard where it lay, and had gone to find her. I doubt not that in his heart was some other hope, that primitive, savage desire that never quite leaves the primitive man—the thirst for vengeance.

Patiently he had trailed them to this camp, to his sorrow. And there he had found her body, and knew that his quest for her at least was at an end, and, with native reasoning, when he saw the cache of food, had concluded that sooner or later his enemy, the Hatchet, would return. Caribou had crossed his trail, and he had an abundance of food, and I doubt not would have remained there, waiting, and waiting, for months, had we not come to tell him that the Hatchet was beyond his earthly reach. Like ours, his quest was at its end.

And so, in time, before the snows were gone, we turned again toward the south. But now it was not so hard, for he had many dogs and we had much food, and the cold was not so drear, and Kentucky was recovering.

It was in the afternoon and the days were already unduly warm, when we trailed through the soft snow around the bend, and caught our view of Neucloviat. The snow had been so soft that it had clogged and delayed us, and the daylight was long, for the sun had returned to the North to bring the melting of the blanket, the breaking of the ice, the songs of the birds and wild fowl flying to their breeding grounds, and the brilliancy of spring. For hours we had skirted the edges of the river, fearing at any time to see dark cracks outlined on its surface. Water was gurgling here and there from the entering streams, and so it was with great relief that we saw the camp.

A group of men stood in front of the trading post, whose door was open, and called to others in surprise at finding anyone still traveling. They ran down the bank as we approached, and first of all I heard Dan's voice bellowing a welcome, mixed with scathing accusations of desertion to conceal his happiness. Kentucky hob-

bled off the sled with his crutch, and Cavanaugh took hold of my arm.

"You've been there?" he questioned, and there was not quite an interrogation in his voice.

"Yes," I said, and I could not repress a shudder.

"Tell me about it to-night," he said, putting a finger to his lips, and I understood and acquiesced.

We talked at random with those around, and Dan and I at last got into the corner of the post alone.

"Tom," he said, "what made you do it? Are you daffy?"

"Dan," I said, "I found it. It's there, lots of it, the red gold."

For a full minute he looked at me, and then reached up and ran his fingers along the edges of my hair.

"And it ran threads of white through there, didn't it, old pardner! And it stole twenty years from the sluice boxes of your life! And so, for me, it can stay there. We have gold, honest gold, bright and yellow, in our own ground. More than you and I'll ever want. I struck it four days after you left, and for weeks there hasn't been a day when there were less

than twenty or thirty men workin' on the claim."

"But, Dan," I said, "I don't think I ought to be in on that. I went away. I didn't help. It ought to be all yours. I've got some of the red gold—maybe ten thousand dollars' worth."

"I'll have none of it!" he roared. "I'm afraid of it. It ain't no good! It's under a curse, as sure as there's a God! Give it to Kentuck, Tom, and be my pardner. I've always figured you as in half, just the same, and just as you figured me in for half of what you'd find away off up there."

He suddenly caught me by both arms, and looked down into my eyes. His voice lowered, and was tender as a woman's:

"I know one reason why you went, Tom. You wouldn't have done it, I have a notion, if it hadn't been that you thought about me and what I told you. Ain't that so?"

I held my tongue. He knew. He gave me a slap on the back that almost toppled me over.

"That's settled!" he declared. "There'll be no more talk about that part of it. You're to give what you brought back to Kentuck. If it makes you feel any better, we'll dope it out that we three own the red-gold claim together, and will go for it if it ever strikes us that we

need it. But now you're my same old pardner, and there's gold enough cached in that safe in the corner over there, so I ain't thinkin' you'll try again for the other."

Outside, Constantine was throwing off Kentuck's and my things. The idlers had turned their attention to an excited argument farther up the street, in front of the Horn Spoon, which now seemed to me like a scene from a past life. I carried in the heavy burden of red that I had clung to through all those desperate leagues, and asked Cavanaugh to put it in his safe. He did so with a wry face, as if hating its sight. I was to see it but once more.

"There's Kentuck, askin' Windy Jim if he can use his cabin till he gets some other place to bunk," Dan's voice growled behind me. "Go tell him now. He must feel bad at havin' nothin', poor cuss!"

I went up and waited until Jim had assured him that he was welcome, and then hastened to join the crowd farther up that turgid line of cabins forming the water front.

"Kentuck," I said, when we were alone, "I always told you that half of whatever I got belonged to Dan; so Dan and you and I are still pardners in that claim back off in the North."

“ Me? Not me! ” he asserted. “ You found it. It’s yours.”

I did not heed him.

“ Dan has struck it while I was gone. I don’t need any of the red gold. So I’m going to make you take what we brought out. There must be about ten thousand dollars’ worth. It will be enough for you to—well, to carry out what you want to do.”

He looked at me in a puzzled way, leaning on his crutch.

“ What I want to do? I don’t quite get you. What do you mean? ”

“ To marry Bessie.” The words came with difficulty, and slow.

He leaned back and laughed, while I stood, open-mouthed.

“ Marry Bessie! Never thought of such a thing! Besides, I’m engaged to a girl down in Kentucky, and she knows it! She’s a bully little pal. She’s the only real sister I ever had, is Bessie! ”

I rubbed my hands over my eyes, and for an instant believed that the madness of that Far North still befogged me. I stammered when I spoke, and the words were jumbled.

“ But I saw her kiss you—and you held her in your arms—and you kissed her—that day

when the mail came in—and you had a letter in your hand then! ”

Again he laughed, and then sobered to a rare gravity.

“ What a fool I am, never to have quite understood, and I wondered a heap about it, too, when there was nothin’ else to do. That letter was from my brother. He’s a big insanity specialist out in the States, and he was answerin’ a letter of mine that I never told her about, in which I put old Bill’s case up to him. Never did so much writin’ about how a man acted in my life! And he wrote back that there was still a chance for Bill, and that, if he could have him brought out, he might pull him around and straighten him out. And when I read the letter to Bessie, she just naturally flung her arms around me, and said: ‘ You dear thing! If I wasn’t in love with Tom, I’d marry you! ’ ”

I could not answer. I was too hurried. I was too far away! I was running up the hill to the cabin of hope, and—well, I was not at Cavanaugh’s to tell him the story until quite late!

They are scattered now, after all these years. Cavanaugh is gone on that last, long trail, and may Heaven rest him! Faithful in life to the

daughter of the woman he loved, he was faithful in death, and she inherited all that he had to give, even to the last red nuggets from his safe, and perhaps, although he left a modest fortune, they were the most prized, for in them was our story. Kentuck comes to see us once in a while, with his brother, to whom, even when dying, Bill Wilton was grateful for his last years of life, the life that held so much that was a blank.

Dan and I pass slow and soft lives up here in the Sierras, and each year our mine pays us well, and we are not eager for more. Particularly is this so with me, when Bessie tells me that she is content, and I am reminded of the long, bitter trail by Malicula and Barsick, sleeping the sleep of the aged on our porch.

It is still there, somewhere off up in that Far North, a reef of gold, red gold, gold the color of blood, as if the blood of all those who sought it had stained it deep down into the frozen soil, and had warmed to perpetual warmth the waters that flow across it from the spring at the foot of the three peaks. But from it I claim nothing, not even a hope, a desire, or a curiosity. Cursed or not, it holds no thrall on me, and I want none of it. Is there anything in

302 THE MOCCASINS OF GOLD

the superstition surrounding it, as it lies there, red and gleaming? That, too, I do not know. But of its story and what it cost those who knew of it, I have told.

THE END



